

Brief prepared for the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

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Like many others, I am critical of the current first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system for several basic reasons. The translation of votes to seats is inequitable, awarding a substantial seat premium to larger parties, especially the largest party, and a diminished share of the seats – less than their share of the vote — to smaller parties. The current system exaggerates regional differences within the country as the strength of parties is often magnified or diminished within particular provinces and regions by the same distorted translation of votes into seats. There is also strong evidence that FPTP is less favourable than other electoral systems to the nomination and election of women and members of minority groups. Moving to a system based on proportional representation would effectively address all of these issues. In my view, the best alternative for Canada from among the various PR systems in use around the world is the mixed-member-proportional system.

In reflecting on the merits of different electoral systems, I would also add some skepticism about a supposed virtue of our current FPTP system, the notion that it is easily understood and used by voters compared to other systems. This idea is undermined by recent developments that have seen citizens and citizen groups engaging in various schemes to try to make their votes more effective under the FPTP system. One example is online “vote-swapping” where two voters in different ridings agree to vote for one another’s preferred party and candidate in the hopes that their transposed votes will have some greater impact on local election outcomes. Another is the extensive local constituency polling, carried out during the 2015 federal election campaign by the advocacy group Leadnow, that was designed to help voters cast a strategic ballot in a number of close ridings. FPTP is a simple system only in the superficial sense that ticking off a single name on the ballot is a straightforward procedure. For citizens trying to figure out how to use the ballot to make their vote carry some weight, voting under FPTP can be an onerous and complex procedure.

As an advocate for change, I also would offer my opinion on the matter of how electoral reform should come about. Some believe we must hold a national referendum on the issue. While I agree this is what we would do in the ideal world, in the real world there is reason to be wary of handing the decision over to a procedure that rests on the deliberative capacity of the general electorate. For a variety of reasons, we have arrived at a stage where many Canadians pay little attention to political issues and would be difficult to draw into meaningful public debate on the many issues surrounding electoral reform.

Consider some of these findings from surveys past and present. In a poll carried out for Elections Canada just after the 2015 federal election, containing a series of basic factual knowledge questions, nearly a third of respondents (30%) could not name the Premier of their own province. For Canadians under age 35, whose disengagement from politics has been of particular concern in recent years, the figure was 44%. These results reflect a significant deterioration over time: in a similar nationwide survey in 1984, only 10% of respondents were unable to name the Premier of their province (15% for those under age 35). Further evidence of a troubling trend of reduced political awareness over time comes from surveys carried out sixty years apart. In a 1956 nationwide Gallup poll, only 24% of Canadians were unable to identify the position held by Anthony Eden (then British Prime Minister). This figure had tripled on the 2015 post-election survey, as 76% could not name the political office held by David Cameron.

I'm not suggesting that knowing the names of various domestic and international political leaders is essential knowledge in order to assess the merits of different electoral systems. I cite these results simply as evidence of a substantial erosion over time in attention to political affairs on the part of a significant number of Canadians. Given this reality, it would be very challenging to reach the electorate at large on an issue – electoral reform — that is relatively technical and not part of the discussions of daily life. Even with an intensive and extended information campaign designed to educate Canadians, many will not acquire the necessary familiarity with electoral systems to make an informed choice.

If a referendum were to be held, the following outcomes should be anticipated. In a stand-alone referendum (one not held in conjunction with the next federal election), voter turnout would be low. In the PEI referendum of 2005, the only one of four provincial referendums on electoral reform that was a stand-alone event, turnout was a meager 33%. In the nation-wide UK referendum on a new electoral system in May 2011 – which coincided with regional assembly elections and local elections in many areas of the country – turnout was still only 42%. In the first of the two New Zealand referendums on electoral reform, a stand-alone event in 1992, turnout was 55.2% – a better result, but still 30 percentage points below the turnout achieved in the second referendum that was held in conjunction with the 1993 general election (85.2%). Given these prior outcomes, and the aforementioned concerns about low levels of attention to political issues among significant sections of the Canadian public, it is reasonable to anticipate turnout below 50% in a stand-alone national referendum on electoral reform – a participation rate that could well raise questions about the democratic legitimacy of the whole exercise.

If a referendum were instead held in conjunction with the next federal election, more would participate. However, a sizeable percentage of those voting would be individuals without a well-formed opinion on electoral reform or much knowledge about alternative electoral systems – i.e. the kind of people who would likely stay home in a stand-alone referendum. The New Zealand experience suggests that such voters tend to favour the FPTP status quo, insofar as support for FPTP was 15% in the first (stand-alone) referendum of 1992 (with most of the other 85% indicating a preference for various PR-based systems, especially MMP), but then jumped to

46% in the referendum that coincided with the 1993 general election. Of course, other factors may also have contributed to this large increase in support for FPTP between the two referendum votes. But what does seem clear is that holding a referendum in conjunction with a general election means that substantial numbers of poorly informed voters will participate in the event; and this too is a less than ideal scenario for lending democratic legitimacy to the outcome.

For all of these reasons, I take the view that a referendum to move forward on electoral reform is neither necessary nor advisable. In lieu of a referendum, it would be legitimate to change the electoral system based on debate and deliberation led by political representatives from across the political spectrum with substantial input from both experts and interested citizens in different venues. Furthermore, I would suggest that such a process has been unfolding in Canada for quite some time now — not just since the Special Committee began its work in early 2016, but for roughly the past fifteen years. Much of that debate has been happening at the provincial level (in the form of appointed commissions, citizen assemblies, legislative deliberations and public hearings), but this should not be seen this as a separate process from what is now taking place at the federal level. The arguments for and against electoral reform are largely one and the same at the two levels, as are the models under consideration. The consistent result of this extensive 15-year public deliberation has been strong support for various forms of PR, a sentiment that is once again (from what I have seen and heard) manifesting itself in testimony provided to the Special Committee.

Further in support of the view that electoral reform can move forward in different ways, I would point to other jurisdictions where electoral systems have been changed without a direct referendum vote on the matter and the process has been seen to have a high degree of legitimacy. The best recent examples are Scotland and Wales, where the MMP system has been used for elections to their regional assemblies since the late 1990s. While referendums were held to decide whether the assemblies themselves should be established, there was no referendum question posed on the electoral system to be used (and it would have been a simple matter to add an additional question to the referendum ballot – in fact in Scotland there was an added question concerning the taxation powers of the new Assembly). In these jurisdictions, the new systems have been adopted and used for a number of years without significant problems or protest.

I would finally comment briefly on two other matters before the committee concerning procedures designed to enhance voter participation: mandatory voting and internet voting. Each of these ideas raises an important immediate concern. Mandatory voting runs the danger that it will force people to vote who have relatively little interest in politics or knowledge about public affairs and who are not, for that reason, in a position to cast an informed ballot. Internet voting, for its part, raises serious concerns about the security and integrity of the vote. Meanwhile, there are many other ideas about ways to encourage voter participation that might avoid some of these problems which are not being considered by the Special Committee. So while I am certainly supportive of initiatives to facilitate access to voting and to encourage higher voter turnout, I

believe this is a subject that deserves separate and more extensive investigation in order to identify the most viable and effective reform proposals.

Notes

Published results from Election Canada’s “2015 Youth Survey” — which focused on youth, but also sampled older Canadians — are reported separately for respondents under age 35 and those 35+. I’ve used a weighted average of the two results (based on their respective shares of the adult population) to calculate a result for all respondents combined. The report can be found at: <http://www.elections.ca/res/rec/eval/pes2015/nys/nys-e.pdf>.

The 1984 survey cited is the 1984 Canadian National Election Study.

The 1956 Gallup poll cited is CIPO Poll 250 (July 1956), which can be accessed through Carleton University’s data library: <https://library.carleton.ca/find/data>.