



**Canadian Unitarians for Social Justice**

*A national liberal religious organization founded in support of Unitarian values*

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A BRIEF TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

Special Committee on Electoral Reform

Chair: Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia

Christine Lafrance and Danielle Widmer  
Clerks of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

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Submitted by

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## CUSJ Brief for the ERRE Committee

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### SUMMARY

This submission covers the case for proportional representation (PR) from the perspective of the Canadian Unitarians for Social Justice (CUSJ), a national, liberal religious organization that actively promotes Unitarian principles and values through social action.

CUSJ believes that electoral reform will directly address Canada's democratic deficit, and once implemented, it will improve our parliamentary process so that other issues that CUSJ cares deeply about, such as discrimination and racism, violations of human rights, poverty and economic injustice, and environmental degradation and climate change, may be properly addressed.

CUSJ is a founding member of the "Every Voter Counts Alliance," which represents millions of Canadians and independent organizations who are calling for electoral reform in Canada.

### The problem

Canada's current first past the post (FPTP) electoral system is failing Canadians at a fundamental level, as the will of the people is not reflected in the current 'winner-take-all' voting system. The current system creates false majorities. Thirty nine percent of the popular vote gives a party one hundred percent of the power in parliament.

Often, voters today feel they have to vote for a less desirable candidate in order to stop someone worse from getting in. Or they know that the candidate or party they want to vote for has no hope of winning, so they vote for someone else. Or they just don't see any one party or candidate that reflects them or their opinions.

Just as troubling, parties know that dominance in one region is very profitable at the polls, so they tend to concentrate in unassailable regional fortresses. Truly national parties with evenly-spread support across the country get severely under-represented on election day. We therefore get one party representing the West, another Quebec, another Ontario or the Atlantic. Not only is consensus and progress on policy that much harder to achieve, but an already highly regionalized country like Canada gets slowly torn apart at the seams.

Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms asserts that Canada is a free and democratic society, and that all citizens deserve equal treatment under the law. To respect our Charter, the Electoral Reform/Reforme Electoral (ERRE) committee needs to promote a form of proportional representation that will make every vote count equally.

### How PR will correct our democratic processes

CUSJ affirms and promotes [seven UU Principles](#). Electoral reform speaks directly to our fifth principle – **'the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large'**.

Canadians deserve an electoral system that is fair and equal. Proportional representation can give us that system. In a PR system the seats in parliament would closely match the level of the popular vote. A true democracy would be inclusionary and would reflect both the will and the makeup of the people. If everyone's vote counted, we would have a *true* majority government. In that broader sense, PR also meets the criteria of the first principle of Unitarian Universalism, that of **'the inherent worth and dignity of every person'**. Since every person has inherent and equal value, so, in a true democracy, every citizen's vote must count equally.

A PR system would change the dynamic of government by replacing the combative discourse of winner-take-all systems with inter-party collaboration and consensus building—a kinder, gentler, more sustainable model.

### **Stable government**

Research shows that PR countries enjoy stable government and robust democracies. PR creates a dynamic of long-term stability. You do not see massive shifts in policy because parties need consensus to pass legislation. Majoritarian systems like FPTP contribute to policy lurch, in which a new government spends its term undoing the policy of the previous government—not the most effective way to govern and build long-term solutions to problems.

Canada has had more federal elections than many other democracies: 22 since 1945. Under PR, we can expect to go to the polls less often. PR countries also tend to outperform winner-take-all countries in terms of environmental outcomes, income equality and fiscal responsibility. Voter turnout averages about 7.5% higher, indicating higher voter engagement. More women are elected<sup>1</sup>, better reflecting the true composition of Canadian society and offering voters a more favourable perception of their democratic institutions.

### **Conclusion**

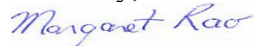
We believe that the ERRE Committee needs to recommend a proportional model for Canada, but which one? Various forms of PR allow the direct election of a local representative as well as a political party, and in a country as vast as Canada, PR should be developed in a way that maintains local representation while enhancing party parity. That is your challenge. We are confident that your multi-party Committee will design a ‘made in Canada’ electoral system that reflects the great diversity of our country and its people.

CUSJ is honored to be participating in the ERRE consultations through this brief, and we are conscious of the historical significance of this moment: Canadian citizens have elected a government on a promise of electoral reform, and we trust that, with public input, the democratic process will lead to a system of proportional representation, in which every vote and every voter counts. This is what representative democracy should look like. Making election results a truer reflection of the vote won’t fix everything that ails our democracy but, more than any other single reform, it will be a major catalyst for all the other needed government policy reforms. Voting reform will also go a long way in restoring the public’s faith in our elected representatives and the democratic process. The Swiss writer Ernest Naville usually wrote about spiritual issues and theology, but about democracy in 1865 he wrote,

*“The right of decision belongs to the majority, but the right of representation belongs to all.”*<sup>2</sup>

So may it be.

Sincerely,



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<sup>1</sup> The makeup of our elected legislatures does not reflect our society as a whole. For example, in Nova Scotia today only 23% of MLAs are women, despite them making up over half of society. Federally, it’s not much better at 24% - and that’s a record high.

<sup>2</sup> From *La patrie et le partis*, 1865, p14-15: “Dans un État démocratique, le droit de décision appartient à la majorité, mais le droit de représentation doit appartenir à tous.”