Submission To the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

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Dear Honourable Members:

Thank you for providing Canadians with the opportunity to comment on the future of Canada's electoral system. I agree with our federal government that the current First Past the Post voting system needs replacing. My preference is for a form of Proportional Representation. In this brief I will propose a simple yet unique voting system that offers local representation and proportional national representation while keeping the voting simple and the number of MPs at 338.

Local Representation

There is no electoral system that will satisfy everyone. The committee is tasked with a near impossible goal of maintaining local representation while improving the relationship between parliament and voters. Most systems that seek to do both come up short on the local representation side.

Proposals using multi-member districts reduce local representation by using larger ridings with multiple representatives.

Ranked ballots tend to promote strategic voting because secondary choices are more likely to be protest votes to minimize disagreeable outcomes. Second hand votes should not carry the same weight as first choice votes because they do not represent voters' real preferences. Just because a voter chooses a winner with his second choice does not mean his vote counts in a way that supports his political goal or personal preference regarding local representation.

With Mixed-Member Proportional Representation (MMPR) the additional list members' votes count as much in parliament as the local members' votes. Every additional list member therefore waters down the power of local representatives. Party representation would better match voter intention allowing Canadian voters to get something closer to what they want in terms of national policy. But local representation would be reduced.

Some proposals alter the voting power of individual representatives in parliament resulting in near-perfect proportional party influence. Though the party seat counts would be similar to FPTP with the same discrepancies, weaker parties would see their members' votes weighing more than those belonging to stronger parties. This works in parliament to effect proportional representation regarding national policy. However, local voters would not be treated equally given that MPs from different ridings could carry substantially different voting weights in parliament. If a small party were to receive five percent of the national vote while electing just one member, this one MP would have about 17 times the parliamentary voting weight of every MP affiliated with the strongest party.

If local representation is to count for something, these proposals must be avoided.

What is Local Representation?

This brings me to question what local representation is. It doesn't seem to be about access. Today if a voter wanted to contact his local MP just down the street he probably would contact her through a website, email, or by phone just as he would someone on the other side of the world. If he did walk into the riding office there is a good chance he would speak to the MP's staff without speaking to the MP. Access is therefore not a good reason to press for local representation.

Accountability is sometimes said to come from having single representatives in the ridings so their performances can be evaluated separately to determine future support at the next election. This seems weak in that all a riding needs is a warm body to occupy the local position while hoping their affiliated party supports policies satisfactory to constituents. The local representative, the local face of the party, either benefits or suffers based on the actions of party leadership. Local representation will be rewarded or punished accordingly. Accountability however, is national so this is not a good reason to require local representation.

It is also said that a local representative should know the local issues or should consult with constituents concerning local issues and then vote in parliament accordingly. The parliamentary voting part is crucial. Who cares if a local representative is sympathetic to local concerns if he then votes for legislation that would be harmful to his constituents?

Local issues and national party concerns are not always compatible and national party leaderships make all the decisions. Under the present system in Canada it is rare for MPs to vote against the wishes of their affiliated party leaderships. Only party independence can give local representatives the power to vote for their constituents. To have real local representation or better local representation somehow the power relationship between parties and their members must change.

Given the above, I suggest the requirement for local representation is new to the Canadian electoral system. While it is often promoted as having local representation, the current system does not provide constituent-level representation in Ottawa.

Local representation as we now know it and better national representation are opposing principles. I will address this issue as an option to my basic proposal.

Basic Proposal

My proposal maintains the 338 local representatives without adding list members. The ballot is simple as it remains unchanged. Almost all votes count toward electing representatives to parliament. Party representation in parliament would closely match voter intention. All MP votes in parliament would remain equal. Most seats would be won by the same candidate as under the current FPTP system. This voting system could be called Single Member Proportional Representation (SMPR).

This proposal is identical to the FPTP electoral system as experienced in October 2015 except in the determination of local winners. The system allocates riding wins to candidates based partly on the most riding votes but also on how well candidates compare to candidates

from their own parties across the country. In the last election the Liberal party collected the most votes in more than 54% of the ridings ending up with 184 seats. Had that election used this proposal, approximately 135 of the strongest of these wins would have gone to the Liberal Party based on the national popular vote of 39.6%. The remaining 50 seats would have gone to the strongest candidates from other parties that needed extra seats to meet their respective proportions of the national vote.

Effectively, each riding would be won by the strongest candidate of a party that needs the seat. Depending on the number of qualifying parties and party vote weightings, between 65% and 90% of ridings would be won by the same candidates who would have won under the FPTP system.

Benefits

Voters will see no change at the voting booth. Parliament will see no change structurally or in how it operates. A large majority of votes cast will help elect members. The makeup of parliament will closely represent the wishes of voters across Canada. A large percentage of local representatives will be the same as those who would be elected under the current FPTP voting system.

Because it is a PR system, parties are more likely to get along than under the present system. And while majority governments will be less frequent, laws passed with the support of two or more parties will be more likely to survive future elections, thereby improving long term governing stability.

As a voter, if your preferred candidate did not win in your riding, you can be assured that your vote will go toward electing candidates from your preferred party in other ridings. The only exceptions are votes for unsuccessful independent candidates and votes for unsuccessful candidates of parties that do not receive a predetermined minimum percent of the national vote.

Downside

The main downfall of this proposal is that a number of ridings would be won by candidates not receiving at least a plurality of riding votes. This is because all votes count nationally. Voters across Canada would effectively help elect less popular party candidates in ridings where the more popular party candidates are weak relative to their own party members. These are generally ridings where the local voters do not definitively choose a representative.

Details

After the voting is complete Elections Canada would determine which parties did not make the minimum national threshold for official recognition. A possible value for this threshold might be 3.6% or 12/338 as it agrees with current practice for recognizing parties. A higher percentage would make the system less proportional while a smaller percentage would support more and smaller parties.

The next step for Elections Canada is to apportion a number of seats to each party based on the national votes. Full integer seats are allocated initially. For example, a party receiving

39.6% of the national vote (not counting votes for independents and non-recognized parties) will receive the integer value of 39.6/100*338 or the integer value of 133.848 or 133 seats. Any seats remaining after all parties receive their initial allocations are distributed to recognized parties having the largest seat remainders. In this example, the party in question has a seat remainder value of 0.848 and if this is the second largest remainder then the party will receive an additional seat if there are at least two leftover seats. To be clear, these are allocated seat numbers, not specific seats or riding wins.

Independent candidates and candidates affiliated with non-recognized parties are determined first using the FPTP method. These candidates win their ridings if they receive at least one more vote than all other candidates. Non-winning candidates from this group are no longer eligible to win because the PR calculation does not apply to them. Votes for unsuccessful independent candidates and votes for unsuccessful candidates affiliated with unrecognized parties are wasted as they are not factored into the PR equation.

The remaining candidates will all be affiliated with recognized parties that will be proportionally represented. Of these candidates the most popular in their ridings will be sorted by their relative popularity against the second most popular candidates in their ridings. The strongest candidates win in their ridings up to the number of seats allocated to their affiliated parties.

Some ridings will not have a decisive winner initially. Some parties will not have won enough ridings to meet their PR seat allocations. These remaining ridings are contested in the same way as in the first round except the candidates from parties having already met their PR allocations are removed from the competition. The most popular of the remaining candidates are compared to the second most popular of the remaining candidates within their respective ridings and the strongest of these are chosen to fill party allocation requirements. The process repeats until there are only a few candidates from one party left.

All of the remaining few single candidates will win because no other candidate from a stronger party was popular enough to win in these ridings. The national vote impacts strong local winners very little but it has an increasing effect on local results with each successive wave of calculations since these ridings are the most competitive.

Example

There are five candidates running in a riding. Candidates A , B and C represent recognized parties while candidate D is affiliated with an unrecognized party. Candidate E is independent.

If candidate D or E have more votes than any other candidate, he or she will represent the riding. If not, their candidacies are disqualified. Also, any votes cast in support of them will not be counted toward proportional representation.

If candidate A leads in the number of votes and her affiliated party (Party A) is allocated at least as many seats as there are leading Party A candidates then all the leading Party A candidates will win their respective ridings including our candidate A.

If Party A is allocated fewer seats than the number of leading Party A candidates, then those leading candidates' relative performances over the second most popular candidates in their

ridings will be compared. In order for candidate A in our riding to win, her comparative rating must be higher than enough Party A leaders to earn her one of the party's allocated seats. Relative performances are calculated as MV/SMV where MV=Most Votes and SMV=Second Most Votes. The resulting number will be a fractional number greater than one. The larger the number the more likely a candidate is to win.

If candidate A is unsuccessful, his candidacy is then disqualified. Any votes cast in support of candidate A will have already counted toward his party's national proportional representation so they are not wasted.

With candidates A, D, and E disqualified, only candidates B and C remain unless one or the other of their parties have already won enough seats. If this is the case, then that candidate is also disqualified and the remaining candidate wins.

If neither candidates B or C are disqualified, the process is repeated to determine the riding winner. If candidate B has more votes than C but cannot win because stronger candidates in her party win enough seats to meet her party's allocation, then candidate C wins.

If candidate C wins it is mostly because of national support for his party since all other candidates affiliated with qualified parties had more votes. He can point out the fact that none of the other candidates were supported strongly enough in the riding to earn the seat for their respective parties. He can also say that other parties did not earn enough votes nationally to support their relatively weaker candidates in the riding.

A spreadsheet simulator of this proposal is available at:

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1_P_HL6dRcSPw0zysfdZamIskNWuv5ey9Sk1r2Y_CGAQ/edit?usp=sharing

It might take 30 seconds or more to calculate depending on equipment, software, and networks. It can be downloaded in a number of formats and run faster on a local computer.

Split Vote Option

Local representation and better national representation are opposing principles. Most methods for improving proportional representation nationally results in some form or other of reduced local representation. Some systems propose to split the vote such that voters can separately vote for their preferred local representative and for their preferred national party.

Sometimes the preferred candidate happens to not be affiliated with the preferred party. The split vote resolves this problem. My proposed system could easily be modified to split the vote. It could be introduced immediately or it could be introduced at some point in the future.

The ballot would look like two of the current ballots combined. One side would list the local candidates and the other side would list the national parties. The candidate selection process would remain unchanged. The only difference would be in the allocations of the national party seats as they would be determined from the party side of the ballot.

While this option is not particularly complicated it does require some additional housekeeping

decisions. With a split ballot, voters could vote for just their preferred party or for just their preferred candidate. How these votes are handled is important.

Should Elections Canada assume a one-sided vote for a party candidate equals a vote for that candidate's affiliated party? Should Elections Canada assume a one-sided vote for a party equals a vote for that party's local candidate? My preference would be for Elections Canada to make these assumptions. The majority of voters most likely would support the candidate affiliated with the preferred party and where this is different, they would have the option to clarify their divergent preferences.

I have voted in every election from all three levels of government over many years and this situation has only presented itself to me once. I voted for my preferred party instead of my preferred candidate. With the split ballot option I could have voted for my preference on both sides. But in all the other elections it would have seemed redundant to vote twice for the same party/candidate combination.

Another possible advantage with the split vote is potentially greater independence of party candidates. Many candidates will have higher percentages of the vote than their affiliated national parties. This suggests that many representatives might be less dependent on their parties as is the case with FPTP. For fear of losing these candidates, parties might be more inclined to allow such candidates some breathing room to vote against the party on issues of high importance to their constituents.

In this way, we could have some improvement in local representation in addition to strengthening the link between voter intention and the overall policies promoted by the national parties.

Other Issues

Pressuring Canadians to vote with either carrots or sticks is a bad idea. We don't need large numbers of ruined ballots or winners because they happen to be first on the ballots.

Internet voting could be beneficial but security must be the highest priority.

A referendum is a bad idea at this point. Many people will not find the time to learn and understand the intricacies of the proposal(s) and will default to the system they already know. Some might fall victim to misinformation and disinformation. It would be better to give voters the experience of two elections and then have a confirmation referendum about something they would by then be familiar with.

Conclusion

There is no electoral system that will satisfy everyone. While I believe my proposal is an important contribution, I am fully aware that it also is not perfect. It is another electoral system the committee can consider and weigh against others. I wish you success in finding the best voting system for Canadians. Thank you again.

Sincerely
Eric Ashby