

# Electoral Reform Discussion Summary

Conducted by Gavin Davies

On Monday, September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2016, at the West Hillhurst Community Centre in Calgary, I conducted a group consultation on the issue of electoral reform in Canada. I decided to hold this meeting because as a person with higher education in politics, I felt motivated to help others become educated and engaged in the subject of electoral reform. There were 15 attendees and 3 others who I got feedback from beforehand. There were 12 men and 3 women, and the ages ranged from 22 to over 70. I began by presenting the pro's and con's of the 5 of the more popular systems: first past the post, alternative vote, single transferrable vote, list proportional, and mixed member proportional. The information I presented was an expanded version of the slides from the Library of Parliament's document "Electoral Systems and Electoral Reform in Canada and Elsewhere: An Overview"<sup>1</sup>. The attendees then filled out a questionnaire supplied by Fair Vote Canada in order to match their values with a voting system<sup>2</sup>, and used it's "Alternatives to First-Past-the-Post" handout for reference.<sup>3</sup> Then the groups of 3 or 4 spent 45 minutes discussing the seven questions asked by the ERRE, as seen below, and then shared their responses with the whole group. These are their compiled notes:

## **1) Why is electoral reform important to you?**

All groups could agree that they were there because there is a need for increased fairness in the voting system, where people can know that their vote actually matters. There was general dissatisfaction with less than 50% of the votes creating majority governments, the lack of MP diversity, and lack of FPTP in meeting the standards of voter equality expected from voting. Most individuals stated that making voting matter could best be done by proportional representation, though most were unclear as to which system would be best, and the nuances of how the various systems work.

## **2) What do you understand to be the strengths and challenges of Canada's current electoral system and of other systems?**

The strengths of FPTP is that it is already known and easy to understand by voters, and its tendency to lead to majority governments means that we do not have to worry about coalitions falling apart. AV is a bit better in terms of getting a majority of votes, but exaggerates regionally powerful parties, which leads to Ottawa not having to listen to the West.

FPTPs challenges are that it also has a higher chance of one regional block that always votes the same way having too much power. It therefore creates artificial majorities and encourages a two party system that limits voter choice and representation.

The strengths of proportional systems are that having more parties gives people a better chance to get their voice heard, and would help increase voter turnout. Also, systems like STV

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.loppar.gc.ca/content/lop/researchpublications/bp437-e.htm>

<sup>2</sup> [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdc4nJFBrAVAxz\\_G4P-BJiMASnZCgGwlbuX6Tw\\_V94XFp35gw/viewform?fbzx=-5337592414656014000](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdc4nJFBrAVAxz_G4P-BJiMASnZCgGwlbuX6Tw_V94XFp35gw/viewform?fbzx=-5337592414656014000)

<sup>3</sup> <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1NVGG42iq00c2obtWWMxWa3zmTZAfAkA5dPtdUbZ0kUA/edit>

can get independents elected, who can provide an alternative to unpopular local candidates. It may also provide a greater barrier to the influences media can have over campaigning.

The weaknesses are that it's harder to form government because coalition governments take more time to begin working, and can be held hostage by a small minority. There is also the issue of increased bureaucracy in setting up the system, and the increased complexity for voters.

### **3) Do you consider Canada's current electoral system to be "fair"? "Inclusive"?**

#### **"Representative"? Why or why not?**

Fair Canada's current system is only fair in the sense that there are clear rules and not a lot of corruption. However, it is very unfair in the sense that there are a lot of wasted votes that do not influence the outcome, and creates artificial majorities.

Inclusive It's not inclusive as not all votes are equal, and most also thought that there is not enough inclusion of new political parties, minorities, and women.

Representative It's not very representative because of strong party whips that mute regional voices, and election results have large discrepancies between the percent of votes and the seats allocated.

### **4) What do you think about mandatory voting?**

There were 3 for and 12 against mandatory voting, as many had the concern that it would be a meaningless increase of turnout; people still would not have any new reason to understand political issues, just an incentive to show up. Those that were for it said that it would have to be in conjunction with a widespread voter education program. Therefore, mandatory voting should only be considered as a last resort.

### **5) What do you think about online voting?**

Most groups emphasized a wariness of the security of such a system. There would need to be a comprehensive means of proving it is secure, which could be done by building up capacity through more local elections to make sure it works. But in an ideal world, yes, online or electronic voting of some kind would be great, as there should be more ways and greater access to voting (eg. increased time for voting, easier voting when outside of home province, etc.). However, there is also the concern that voting could be coerced by family members if it was done at home.

### **6) What do you think should be the future steps for electoral reform (such as a citizen's assembly, a referendum, etc.)?**

All groups agreed that there should not be a referendum. There was a general concern of divisive politics where partisanship wins over facts, and that the average citizen would not be able to make an educated decision due to the complicated nature and wide variety of voting systems. There was a sentiment that referendums should only be for constitutional issues, and cases such as this should be done by informed MPs on the behalf of citizens.

There were only a few who were for citizen's assemblies, because even though they are useful in educating the people who are a part of the process, too often their findings have not been implemented.

Also, the fact that the electoral reform committee is proportional to the current seat breakdown in the House gives reassurance that any new system would not heavily favour one party over the others. However, the group would be even more reassured if in addition there was a mandated sunset clause that reviews the new voting system after two elections. One

person also wanted to be assured that electoral reform could not be overridden by a conflict with the constitution.

**7) Each type of electoral system emphasizes certain purposes and values/principles. What values and principles do you think ought to be prioritized when designing an electoral system for Canada?**

One of the most fundamental values that all groups agreed upon was responsibility. The majority agreed that this could best be assured through a proportional system, with most leaning towards STV over MMP. This was because most people agreed that ideological representation at the federal level is more important than having a local representative who knows that specific area; local representation is needed more so for MLAs and Aldermen. Also, having a proportional system could help the system improve in creating cross-party cooperation.

**Summary/Recommendations**

- Both FPTP and AV do not go far enough in representing people's interests
- We need a proportional system that makes every vote count
- Having a local representative is not as important as ideological representation
- There needs to be a system that makes voting fair and inclusive of minority viewpoints
- The new voting system should not systematically benefit one party over the others
- People should not be forced to vote
- Referendums are too divisive and costly; MPs should be trusted to make informed decisions on our behalf
- Coalition governments have more positive benefits than negatives