

Submission to The Special Committee on Electoral Reform

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Main Submission

Thank you for all of your diligent efforts in hearing the testimony of experts from around the world and within Canada. Along with many others, I greatly appreciate the opportunity to have a direct say in this process - to be heard and to feel that we are actually participating in an effective and meaningful way in this country's political process. This is so unlike the feelings I have about our voting in all of the past elections that I've witnessed. Let's make our country and all its voters winners with a new, real democracy!

Effectiveness and legitimacy

I have always believed myself extremely fortunate to have been born and to have lived in Canada my whole life. Public service and political awareness have always been an important part of my life, having worked among other things as a government environmental scientist, a school teacher and in a public library. As a former teacher though, seldom would I have used our government as an example of one of which to be proud, something to be imitated. For I have lived my entire adult life, voting almost half a century, with a full awareness that our electoral process is deeply flawed, generally producing a demoralizing democratic deficit. With each election producing absurd results, such as regional sweeps, second place parties forming 'majority' governments, fourth place separatist parties forming the official opposition and most voters without a representative of their views, it is a stretch to say we are a democracy, let alone a modern one. Political dynasties continue to prevail in specific regions of the country, holding on to all the seats in a region, despite substantial and even majority opposition to the 'winning' party. More than half the voters in elections could have stayed home and they would have had absolutely no impact on the outcome of the election. It is a wonder to me that they, like myself, even bother with the effort to vote, for we are all too aware that we are unlikely to have representation in government.

At the same time, the nature of the current electoral system is such that hyperpartisan attack campaigns have come to typify our elections, as the very system supports and rewards such an approach, so our democracy continues to erode. Campaigns can target a very few 'swing' ridings, and a shift of a few percentage points, yields new, dictatorial 'false' majority governments. Then next election, another relatively minor shift in support yields yet a different false majority and extreme policy reversals occur, yielding an unpredictable and governmentally unstable outcome. This is costly and wastes a great deal of our legislative energy and most importantly, it does not represent the genuine, median views of our country. For we are an increasingly diverse nation of many background, views and experience. We all deserve to be heard and to be represented in the deliberations and actions of government. A move to proportional representation is the only acceptable course for our country, the benefits of which are widely known, beginning with truly universal suffrage and a representative democracy for all voters. Changing our electoral system will fundamentally alter how people vote and hence, how we are governed. People need to feel much less cynical about their governments and the processes used to elect them.

In the 2015 federal election, all of the major national parties excepting the Conservatives (who have made clear they do not want reform or any discussion), campaigned on electoral reform and this current parliament has an unarguable mandate to bring about the much-needed changes before the next general election. Broad consultation and expert advisors are essential but we shouldn't hold a referendum to decide whether or not we need to be fair, to decide if all citizens deserve an effective vote. It is a basic democratic right and arguably, one that should be guaranteed by our Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. It is now a full century since the first great strides began in Canada to bring about universal suffrage and we're still not there. It is time.

There is only one party insisting on a referendum and they are the same party which prorogued parliament, forced through the 'Unfair' Elections Act and ruled autocratically for over 4 years, claiming legitimacy as a 'majority' government. They are totally lacking in any moral authority or basic credibility with their self-serving opposition to electoral reform and they have not made any substantive contribution to this committees work, always angling during questions of various experts, to find support for their demand for a referendum. One wonders, do they not support fair voting in Canada? Do they have any positive ideas for electoral reform? In calling for a referendum, they seem to be serving their party interests.

Referendums can be manipulated and almost always have lower voter turnout than do elections. The first BC referendum on electoral reform was supported by an almost unprecedented majority, yet by stipulating the requirement of a 'super majority', it was designed to fail, by the ruling government which was opposed to this change. This is a powerful argument against referendum, as is the recent example of the UK and its Brexit referendum result. There are huge deficiencies with referendums and they are in no way the correct approach to bring about long overdue electoral reform. Let's cut out this nonsense and get some expert leadership to bring about a fair, democratic system which gives representation to all and governance by a true majority through proportional representation. Let's hear a lot more from our government to educate, inform and engage Canadians and not abandon the narrative to media empires who craft a message intended to manipulate inattentive voters, not to better prepare them to participate in making needed changes in our country.

I am someone with above average knowledge and interest in this subject and I know the relative merits of STV, MMP and other forms of proportional representation. However, only those of you on the ERRE 'jury' have had the broad and comprehensive exposure to the many testimonies heard over recent months. This allows you the status of experts with the knowledge to choose and implement the specific electoral system we would most benefit from. You're elected to do the job and the fundamental premise of our representative democracy is that you will fully discharge your duty to carry out the wishes of your fellow citizens and to make the necessary changes, allowing our democracy to function better. Very few Canadians are interested in anything more than having a fairer electoral system. The complexities we leave to you experts, as with all the other governance matters in our representative democracy. Our country is diverse and our elections should reflect that and give a voice and shared power that reflects this, with a balanced voice of reason, compassion, cooperation and compromise. No minority viewpoint should dominate and be able to ignore the disenfranchised majority. It is simply anti-democratic to allow a minority to rule over the majority. Canadians however, should be given ample, expert and impartial information on the electoral process (as should all MP's, many of whom appear woefully lacking in knowledge in this area) and the changes which are necessary and recommended. Only after some experience with several election cycles, after implementation of a system of proportional representation, should any form of referendum be considered. As a simple matter of cost, it could be included with a general elections, to gauge the satisfaction of voters with the implemented changes. Further refinements will always be possible.

Finally, on the matter of legitimacy, we need to address the manner in which the party in power uses its position to undemocratically skew the election in its favour. A key example is the use of public tax dollars to pay for expensive advertising campaigns which ostensibly are to inform the public but which are effectively promoting the parties image in the period leading into an election. Unequivocally, there should be an absolute moratorium on such promotions for at least 6 months prior to an election and some sort of auditor should be in place to ensure compliance, with powerful sanctions to impose for any breaches. Similarly, there needs to be a fixed length for the duration of election campaigns. In a very undemocratic manner, the previous government imposed an absurdly long campaign on voters and other less wealthy parties, strategically seeking to outlast them financially, with the added 'benefit' of wearing out voters, hoping to gain from this with the further disengagement of voters.

Engagement

With a voting system to believe in, research has shown that people will be more likely to vote, to trust their government and its representatives, to feel free to vote their conscience with an expectation that they will have

someone to represent their views. With proportional representation, greater gender balance and representation of diversity will occur, as there is no longer any reason to vote strategically.

Changing our electoral system will drastically change how political parties and candidates campaign and how they participate in government. With a more responsive electoral system, politicians will know that they will have to amend their acrimonious attitudes and behaviours, considering the views and courting the votes of all Canadians. Collaborative, cooperative politics and policies, truly representative of the diverse views of Canadians can prevail and a kinder, gentler democracy can evolve, greatly diminishing the abhorrent behaviour that often prevails in the partisan politics we witness today. Coalition government may in fact become the norm with proportional representation, but history records that our country has witnessed some of its most progressive and essential achievements when they have been obliged to negotiate and work to compromise and consensus under minority/coalition governments. The resulting policies from minority governments have stood the test of time, not being immediately reversed by the next government - because most of the elected representatives had agreed on a middle path in creating policies and legislation. Such governance, by a true majority, will also end the absurd policy flip-flops which occur as one government is defeated and another false majority takes over and begins by reversing many of the previous governments actions. The very notion of democracy is that people with differing views, come to agreements with which all can be satisfied. No minority should govern the majority.

We need mandatory voting. Ours is, unfortunately, a lazy democracy and often, by default, we've given up a lot of control, allowing unrepresentative governments to define our country, alter its course and attempt to undermine its core values. No less than paying taxes or obeying the laws, all voters have a duty to participate in our democracy. Jurisdictions with mandatory voting have much higher voter participation, and we could achieve the same, either by offering tax credits for taking part or fines for failure to vote, with few exceptions.

Measures taken in high school to register and engage young adults to prepare to participate in our country's democracy would be invaluable. I do not agree they should be unable to vote until the age of majority. If they can go to jail or serve in our military, then they have the right to a say in how the country is governed and run. There is a far greater liability to our democracy from older, uninformed, cynical and disengaged voters who abdicate their responsibilities, than there is from the input of youthful and inexperienced voters who often have much more passion and enthusiasm with a strong drive for fairness motivating them. Let's give them hope and a basis for optimism to start out their journeys of participatory citizenship.

Accessibility and inclusiveness

Have supplemental assistance at the polls for those lacking literacy skills, like that used in some low-literacy countries e.g. graphic and pictorial representation to enable voter to indicate choices/preferences. There is obviously a financial cost to such measures but the payoff is worth it. All voters should have equal access to voting.

Integrity

I have not heard anything, expect concerns voiced by experts about security, to suggest that online voting would be viable at this time. I feel it's full-scale introduction into our electoral process would be perilous and unacceptable. We've seen very dubious election results in other countries, including the U.S., and without an absolute guarantee of security and the ability to verify individual votes, we should not be using any voting process that does not meet the highest level of security and integrity. An exception to this could be the use of a small-scale pilot project for online voting, provided it does pass rigorous tests on security and voting integrity and which can be verified by a voting audit.

Local representation

Voters in all constituencies should have reasonable access to their elected representatives. Small populations, dispersed over large regions present special challenges which should be addressed with measures allowing engagement with a citizen's elected representative but it should not give these ridings more legislative 'clout'.

Each vote should carry the same effective weight in parliament and small riding should have 'deputy MP's' or some other accommodation to facilitate access and communication, without giving these voters more say in parliament than that of a similar number of voters living concentrated in an urban area. Constituency service and legislative representation are separate matters and should be provided in equal measure to all voters.

In closing, once again I thank you and implore you. Please carry through with the desperately needed reforms our country needs and don't break faith with those of us from whom you have heard. Our numbers have not been in the millions and our voices are muted in a media which is controlled by specific interests. Yet we are in the majority - Canadians who love and value this country and all its people. Set aside partisan interests and do the right thing. For history is forging ahead and change will happen. Please do your part and come up with the electoral changes we so desperately need. This is a necessary start and there is much more to be done. Let's make our people proud and be an example of a modern, 21st century democracy!

Summary

Effectiveness and legitimacy

- our outdated first-past-the-post system is deeply flawed, generally producing a demoralizing democratic deficit
- no minority viewpoint should dominate and be able to ignore the disenfranchised majority
- a move to proportional representation is the only acceptable course for our country, the benefits of which are widely known and especially to ensure all votes count
- absurd election results, such as regional sweeps, second place parties forming 'majority' governments, fourth place separatist parties forming the official opposition and most voters without a representative of their views are unacceptable
- campaigns can target a very few 'swing' ridings, and a shift of a few percentage points, yields new, dictatorial 'false' majority governments
- people feel they are unlikely to have representation in government, so they don't bother to vote
- the nature of the current electoral system is such that hyperpartisan attack campaigns have come to typify our elections, as the very system supports and rewards such an approach
- we are a diverse nation; we all deserve to be heard and to be represented in the deliberations and actions of government
- changing our electoral system will fundamentally alter how people vote and hence, how we are governed
- all of the major national parties excepting the Conservatives campaigned on electoral reform and this current parliament has an unarguable mandate to bring about the much-needed changes before the next general election
- there are huge deficiencies with referendums and they are in no way the correct approach to bring about long overdue electoral reform; they are used to kill reforms
- need elected experts with the knowledge to choose and implement the specific electoral system we would most benefit from
- broad consultation and expert advisors are essential but we don't hold a referendum to decide whether or not we need to be fair, to decide if all citizens deserve an effective vote; the complexities we leave to you experts, as with all the other governance matters in our representative democracy
- need to address the manner in which the party in power uses its position to undemocratically skew the election in its favour (use of public tax dollars to pay for expensive advertising, extended duration of

election campaigns)

Engagement

- with proportional representation, people will be more likely to vote, we'll have greater gender balance, representation of diversity and end strategic voting
- will drastically change how political parties and candidates campaign and how they participate in government
- collaborative, cooperative politics and policies, truly representative of the diverse views of Canadians can prevail and a kinder, gentler democracy can evolve
- governance, by a true majority, will also end the absurd policy flip-flops we see
- need to educate, inform and engage Canadians
- all voters have a duty to participate in our democracy and mandatory voting should occur; achieve by offering tax credits for taking part or fines for failure to vote
- engage young adults in high school to register
- those old enough to go to jail or join armed forces deserve to vote

Accessibility and inclusiveness

- have supplemental assistance at the polls for those lacking literacy skills
- all voters should have equal access to voting

Integrity

- online voting is not viable at this time; it's full-scale introduction into our electoral process would be perilous and unacceptable.

Local representation

- voters in all constituencies should have reasonable access to their elected representatives; each vote should carry the same effective weight in parliament
- constituency service and legislative representation are separate matters and should be provided in equal measure to all voters

Please carry through with the desperately needed reforms our country needs!