

Oct. 6, 2016

To: The Special Committee on Electoral Reform

Re: Brief for the public consultation on federal electoral reform

I will, herein, make a strong recommendation to the committee to select a system of proportional representation. As a Canadian citizen who has been politically engaged and actively voting for 34 years, I hope the committee will find my experience as a voter to be compelling evidence. I intend to show that the current FPTP system is not serving Canadians well, and is a significant contributor to voter apathy; and that a system of proportional representation will re-invigorate both the Canadian electorate and the political process in Ottawa.

I have voted in every federal and provincial election since coming of age. I am keenly aware of the weighty responsibility held by the electorate in a pluralistic democracy. Thus, I attend all-candidates meetings and research the election platforms of candidates from every party so I can make an informed choice and contribute to the political life of my country. While I have always lived in communities with others that share my values and aspirations, the electoral ridings those communities are embedded within tend to vote otherwise. The net result is that, under FPTP, my vote has NEVER counted – with a single exception – in ANY federal or provincial election. Despite untold hours spent engaging in Canada's electoral process, my *heartfelt* vote has not contributed to a single candidate being elected.

There is one exception, worth mentioning. In the past federal election I decided to put aside my belief in voting for the candidate I felt best represents me. I used the only tool available to me to make my vote count by voting strategically. I held my nose, and I cast a vote for a candidate whom I did not believe in, but who appeared to have the best chance of winning over the incumbent, who's platform I objected to even more strongly. It worked, my vote finally counted. Is that how democracy should work?

I have no doubt – zero – that FPTP contributes to voter apathy. I can tell you that I have felt frustrated and ready to disengage for 20 years, since realizing that my vote just never seemed to count. Having to resort to strategic voting – essentially voting against something instead of for something – is like the last straw. I am completely exhausted and disheartened by our outdated electoral system, and it is easy for me to see why so many people just can't be bothered. Why would they? Their vote probably won't count anyhow, and some candidate with 34% of the votes will be left representing them.

I'm sure I do not need to list the electoral absurdities produced by FPTP, with majority governments being elected by a significant minority of voters being chief among them. I am also sure that the committee has more insight and data with which choose a proportional system that will work best for Canada. Thus, I will not recommend a specific proportional system, but rather urge the committee to discard any form of FPTP and focus their work on choosing a system that makes every vote count, and ensures that voters like me feel their vote is valued, and the time spent on elections is well-spent.

I will close by briefly documenting how any proportional system is aligned with the principles laid out in the committee's mandate.

1) Effectiveness and legitimacy

As I have shown, FPTP has eroded my confidence that my democratic choice is expressed by my vote, to the point where I no longer feel I can even express my democratic choice, but instead must 'game' the system to get a 'less bad' outcome. The string of majority governments elected by a minority of voters is clear evidence that FPTP distorts electoral outcomes and breaks the link between voter intentions and electoral outcomes.

A proportional electoral system ensures that every vote counts – that my views have representation in Ottawa, despite which electoral riding I happen to live in. It creates a strong link between the intentions expressed by voters in the ballot box and the representatives elected to office. It is 'fair' – plain and simple, just fair.

2) Engagement:

As I have shown, FPTP is inherently demoralizing if you live in a riding where 34% (or whatever) of voters don't share your views. I am ready to disengage with federal elections – it's not worth the effort. FPTP also encourages a 2-sided debate during campaigns – us vs. them – rather than the more nuanced, multi-faceted debate expected of a pluralistic democracy.

A proportional systems allow minority views within a riding to be present in the campaign, for their views and platforms to actually be considered seriously and be part of the discussion. That will engage more voters and make them feel the electoral system is inclusive and responds even to underrepresented groups.

3) Accessibility and inclusiveness:

I live in BC, where we recently had a chance to replace FPTP with a proportional system (STV). This was defeated largely because people were convinced it was too complex. That distortion was unfortunate, since the ballot itself was very simple to understand and complete, but the counting of ballots was a bit complex. I think many proportional systems suffer from this, and the committee should be careful to differentiate between complexity for the voter – how hard is it to complete the ballot – vs. complexity to actually tally the vote. So long as the electorate can understand how their vote will be used, there is no need to understand the actual math or algorithms used to tally votes.

4) Integrity:

I will take a tangent here and say that the committee should reject online voting at this time. I work a software engineer, and can say without doubt that the integrity of such a system simply cannot be guaranteed at this time. Some kind of block chain system might eventually prove trustworthy, but the technology is just not there at present. The potential for a ruling party, a corporation, or even a rogue programmer or hacker to tamper with e-ballots is present and would severely undermine Canadian's trust in the system of counting ballots. Online voting would be good for me personally, but I think bad for the electoral system at this time.

5) Local representation:

I have said I would leave it to the committee to choose the best proportional system for Canada. But I do believe that local representation is critical in such a large, diverse country. So a strictly national proportional system (closed-list popular vote) would be a poor fit for Canada. Luckily, there are many proportional systems that maintain local representatives in use around the world. I encourage the committee to seek out examples that are working well.

With many thanks for the work you are doing and for receiving this brief. I wish you well in your deliberations, and place my hope and trust in you to improve Canada's broken electoral system.