

Submission to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform
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Adopting a mixed member proportional (MMP) electoral system would best align with the five principles set out in the Committee's mandate. More importantly, among the various systems, an MMP model that is tailored to the needs of a large and diverse federation would best advance the broader interest of fostering a healthy, inclusive and representative democracy.

The following discussion addresses the guiding principles, with an emphasis on “Engagement”. Although there is much intersection between the principles, greater engagement lends itself to more legitimate governments, and the possibility of more inclusiveness and integrity, both in Parliament and the political process.

1. Effectiveness and legitimacy

Given the tendency of the first past the post (FPTP) system to produce majority governments that do not accurately reflect the electorate's party preferences on a national or provincial level¹, the significant legislative power wielded by majority governments gives rise to concerns about political legitimacy. What might appear to be a significant mandate when expressed in seat counts, is often less so when expressed in terms of ballots cast. The problem of legitimacy is compounded when party discipline and a culture that discourages independence among MPs concentrate power in the executive.

While on one level, an electoral system that produces majority governments might be said to be “effective”, I believe a more accurate descriptor would be “efficient”. And in a parliamentary democracy, a system that favours efficiency over legitimacy cannot be said to be truly effective. To the extent that such a system discourages participation in the political process and reduces the government's accountability to the public, the converse is true.

2. Engagement

In addition to reducing the legitimacy of Canadian governments, the discrepancy between how Canadians vote and the composition of Parliament serves as a disincentive for many to participate in politics. There is a clear link between legitimacy and engagement in the democratic process: as people decide not to vote or otherwise engage in politics, the legitimacy of the entire system suffers. There are many reasons why people do not participate in the political process and no one solution to encourage greater engagement. Yet in the context of discussing engagement and electoral reform, a guiding principle should be to select an electoral system in which the act of voting makes people feel more connected to, and better represented by, their MPs. This calls for a better match between voting preferences and representation in Parliament.

¹ There are rare exceptions. Using the 2015 federal election as an example, Manitoba was the only province where the percentage of seats won by each of the Liberals, Conservatives and New Democrats (the Greens were excluded with about three per cent of the provincial vote) came close to matching the percentage of each party's share of the popular vote for the province. The results in other provinces demonstrate that significant discrepancies (e.g., above 10 per cent for all three major parties in Ontario and the Maritimes) were the norm. Turning to the national vote, the Liberals received a percentage of seats that exceeded their share of the vote by about 15 per cent. Conversely, the New Democrats received about seven per cent fewer seats, and both the Conservatives and Greens received about three per cent fewer seats. Since each territory could elect one MP, I have referred only to the provincial and national results in comparing the percentages of seats won by a party versus the party's percentage of votes.

Having lived in a variety of ridings – from primarily rural to densely urban, and some on a spectrum in between – I can speak to a number of experiences involving differently-situated individuals. Sadly, under the FPTP system it is not uncommon for an urban “conservative” or rural “progressive” to feel that their vote is futile. It may be that a plurality of votes is assured in certain “safe” ridings. A vote for the candidate and/or party of that person's choice feels “lost”, since to that person it will have no impact beyond becoming a statistic for the record books. In other cases, strategic voting may lead an individual to the polls, but underlying concerns about a lack of meaningful, effective representation remain. This is no way to build citizen engagement. Particularly in a country of Canada's size and diversity, promoting greater engagement requires a strong connection with the federal government, representation in Parliament, and assurance that local choices and preferences will be represented beyond the national vote count.

Our current system's failure to accurately reflect local choices is illustrated by two different examples – one from the Maritimes, the other from Saskatchewan – from the last federal election.

Although the results under FPTP gave Atlantic Canada 32 members of the Liberal caucus, it is striking that the voices of Maritimers who voted for the Conservatives or New Democrats are not at all reflected in this seat count.² No doubt there are benefits to having representation within the ruling party, but one wonders if Atlantic Canadians might also want a local voice in opposition, freed from the pressures of forming part of government. Equally, an Atlantic Canadian whose views did not align with the majority party might feel better connected to the political process if the region had some representation from a party s/he supported.

Looking at this issue from a different regional perspective, a Saskatchewan Liberal voter might be pleased to know that the province has a seat at the Cabinet table. But with 24 per cent of the provincial vote going to the Liberal Party, it would be reasonable to question why the province is not better represented in the Liberal caucus.³

An MMP electoral system that makes up for such divergences between the seats won at the local riding level and a party's share of the popular vote in a region through the selection of MPs from regional party lists would result in a more representative Parliament (both regionally and on a national basis) and serve as a greater incentive for Canadians to engage with the political process.

3. Accessibility and inclusiveness

If the composition of Parliament more accurately reflected how people expressed themselves through the act of voting, Canadians would not only feel more engaged in the political process, but greater engagement could open the possibility to MPs more accurately reflecting the diversity of Canadian society. A lack of engagement in mainstream politics is perhaps most acutely felt among historically disadvantaged communities – not least those who have been excluded from the political process at various times. As Canada moves towards reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and works to achieve

2 Based on the 2015 federal election results, the Liberals took 100 per cent of the seats across New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador, with about 51.5, 62, 58 and 64.5 per cent of the votes in those respective provinces. This left sizeable percentages of the voting population with no representation on the opposition benches (e.g., about 25 per cent voted for the Conservative Party and 18 per cent for the NDP in New Brunswick).

3 Based on the 2015 federal election results, the sole Liberal seat from Saskatchewan represents about seven per cent of the provincial vote. A more proportional outcome would have resulted in the Liberals winning two or three additional seats in the province.

substantive equality in accordance with fundamental constitutional principles, its electoral system should not remain rooted in the nineteenth century. While there has undoubtedly been some progress in increasing the representation of women and some racialized communities in Parliament, it remains far from reflective of Canadian society. To the extent that MMP would be likely to foster more engagement than FPTP, increased legitimacy and inclusiveness should reasonably be expected to follow.

4. Integrity

Related to the problems of legitimacy arising from FPTP's proclivity for producing large majority governments from much lower percentages of the popular vote is a concern about the quality of our political debate. This is an issue that touches on the integrity of how politics is practiced and also a cause for the lack of engagement in politics amongst certain parts of the population.

A system that typically generates majority governments with less than 40 per cent of the popular vote, and in which a plurality of seats could be between 25 and 35 per cent in a given riding, risks rewarding parties who do what is necessary to attract a “winning” number. This might involve overlooking the important interests of a wide segment of the population or exploiting divisive issues for short-term political gain. More significantly, the reality of majority government combined with party discipline means that there is often little need to seek consensus from other parties when making decisions on significant issues. It is easy to see why the quality of debate and discourse in Parliament often descends to partisan bickering that does little to inspire the confidence of the broader public.

In contrast to FPTP, a more proportional system would be likely to require parties to work together to formulate policies in the public interest. Rather than looking for opportunities to score political points against an opponent with a view to securing a further majority or one day forming a majority government, parties would be expected to work together to form a consensus that reflects the will of the electorate. This type of productive co-operation is something the public expects and something of which our MPs are clearly capable if given the chance. Minority government need not have a pejorative connotation. In many instances it means better accountability, better legitimacy and better integrity.

5. Local representation

A system of proportional representation that is suited to the realities of the Canadian federation must include an element of local representation, ideally through the election of local MPs at the riding level. As discussed in the section on “Engagement”, a more inclusive and accurate form of local representation than the current FPTP model would result from the adoption of an MMP system with regional selection mechanisms built in. This would better ensure that diverse regional perspectives are represented in Parliament. Voters would be assured a local MP who could help constituents navigate federal government programs and represent local interests. At the same time, electing additional MPs from regional party lists to achieve a better level of proportionality in seat distribution would ensure that the concerns of constituents with opposing viewpoints are heard and more fully represented in Parliament.

As a final note, frustration with the current way of practising politics and conducting elections seems to have manifested itself in the results of the 2015 federal election. Roughly 62.5 per cent of the electorate cast votes for parties that had committed to (a) adopting a version of proportional representation (PR); or, (b) replacing FPTP with another system, which might include PR. This is a strong mandate for change. I would ask that the Committee respect this desire by recommending a move to an MMP electoral system that is better representative of Canadians' voting preferences, while respecting the

important principle of local and regional representation.