

Brief

*Submitted to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform
Parliament of Canada*

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Summary

This brief shares a personal story explaining why a non-partisan Canadian cares deeply about reforming our electoral system, and offers an individual perspective on the best way forward for the committee's consideration.

Recommendation 1: The following key considerations should shape Canada's new electoral system:

- All votes must matter – this presumes a high level of proportionality in election outcomes, and is essential to improving citizen engagement
- The new system should build on the strengths of the current system (direct representation by one or more members; high level of trust in the integrity of the system)
- The new system should avoid building unnecessary complexity (in the ballot and the calculation of results)
- All regions of the country should be represented in government and in at least one opposition caucus

Recommendation 2: Simply adding a ranked ballot (or preferential voting) to our current system will still leave us with a winner-take-all system (Alternative Vote) – one that may produce even greater distortions in the outcomes of elections than First Past the Post. This is not the system Canada should adopt.

Recommendation 3: Canada should adopt a form of mixed member proportional, filling regional top-up seats using the runner-up system. This model keeps what's best about our current system, while adding proportionality and minimizing regional distortions. It's simple, provides direct representation, and does not rely on party lists. It can be implemented by 2019.

Recommendation 4: A referendum before 2019 is not desirable and may not be possible. However, the committee could consider recommending a referendum or plebiscite to be held at some point in the future, following the implementation of the new system promised for 2019.

First, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of the committee members for your work on this issue that is so critical to improving Canada's democracy. Especially, thank you for your time listening to the information and views provided by experts from around the world and Canadians across the country, myself included.

I have followed the work of the committee closely, watching much of the witness testimony and taking advantage of living in Ottawa to attend meetings in person. Knowing what you have heard, I will not repeat the many arguments explaining why our electoral system must be improved. Instead, I'm going to share my personal story, to tell you why electoral reform is important to me. Then I will offer my perspective on the best way forward, for your consideration.

I consider myself to be non-partisan. I have supported different parties in elections and generally find that my personal opinions lie somewhere in between the positions taken by the parties. I have supported some policies of all parties across the political spectrum, and opposed others. Despite my lack of party affiliation, I am very committed to Canada's democracy. I have served as a Deputy Returning Officer during most federal and provincial elections for over a decade, and I have volunteered on initiatives aimed at informing and encouraging young voters.

As you will recall, not long ago we had three federal elections in fairly quick succession. For our family, this was during the period when our children were in school, learning about Canada and experiencing the first elections that they will remember. Kitchen-table discussions about the elections and other current events were the norm in our family at that time.

Something my son said during one of these talks made a very deep impression on me; so much so that I can directly connect that one comment to why I am writing this brief to the committee. You see, we live in a "safe seat" – Ottawa South – one of the many in Canada where how you vote – or even whether you vote – doesn't really make a difference to the outcome of an election.

Before our children turned 18, we always said that we have four people but only two votes, so we had to decide at the kitchen table how we should exercise the family franchise. My son remembered the conversations from two years earlier and said something like: "Why do we bother talking about this? We already know who's going to win in our riding so how we vote won't matter."

Wow. Coming from someone who was about ten years' old, that hit pretty hard. He was right. Simply participating pro forma isn't enough. How could I tell him that voting is important if it doesn't make a difference? Participating in our country's democratic process should be more meaningful; voting should have impact. And people should be able to vote sincerely, not feel pressured to vote strategically so their least-favourite candidate is less likely to win.

This experience led me to investigate electoral systems and electoral reform movements in Canada and internationally. I joined Fair Vote Canada and began volunteering in support of electoral reform, proportional representation in particular.

Poll after poll has shown that about 70% of Canadians generally support the idea of proportional representation. This general support does not necessarily translate into an interest in the details, which shouldn't be surprising; it's a complex topic, and only political types and those avidly interested in electoral systems really want to get into the nuts and bolts.

Even among the active electoral-reform supporters, being non-partisan is a bit of an oddity. From my experience with elections and studying electoral systems and reform movements over the past decade, I offer the following perspective for the committee's consideration. It's a perspective I have tried to align with the general sentiment of the 70% of Canadians who just want a better, more representative electoral system and more civil, cooperative government.

There are many proposals on the table for possible electoral systems that Canada could adopt. However, there are only really two "families" of electoral systems: winner-take-all systems and proportional systems. Within these two families there are many variations and different degrees of proportionality, different ways of structuring ballots, and different levels of party control of candidates/lists.

Simply adding a ranked ballot (preferential voting) to our current system will still leave us with a winner-take-all system (usually called Alternative Vote [AV]) – one that may produce even greater distortions in the outcomes of elections. Australia is the only major democracy currently using this system (for lower house elections). Recent Australian politics are hyper-partisan, with elections producing swings from left- to right-leaning majority governments that are constantly undoing each other's policies. Even the Australian business press is now calling for electoral reform.

This is not the path for Canada to take. It does, however, serve to show that "majority government" is not a synonym for "stability" in government. Similarly, "minority government" and "coalition" do not necessarily imply a lack of stability. Playing games with semantics and using misinformation to create wedges must be avoided if Canada is to achieve the goals of this electoral-reform project in time for the 2019 election.

Of the many varieties of proportional systems proposed, it will be important to assess the systems' alignment with the democratic values outlined in the motion establishing the committee's mandate. From my reading of the reports submitted thus far, there does not appear to be a clear indication of which principles Canadians value most. From my perspective, based on my personal research and witness testimony, the following should be key considerations:

- All votes must matter – this presumes a high level of proportionality in election outcomes, and is essential to improving citizen engagement
- The new system should build on the strengths of the current system (direct representation by one or more members; high level of trust in the integrity of the system)
- The new system should avoid building unnecessary complexity (in the ballot and the calculation of results)

- All regions of the country should be represented in government and in at least one opposition caucus – avoiding situations where parties (and their supporters) are shut out in some regions and legitimately feel unrepresented in Parliament

This last point has been eloquently argued by several witnesses, linking it to national unity. One of the greatest failings of the current system is the regional distortions it creates – emphasizing differences and ignoring the common ground among Canadians across the country. In addition, all major parties and their supporters would benefit: Conservatives who have been shut out in the Maritimes and major urban areas, Liberals and NDPs who have long been under represented in the Prairies despite substantial support, and Greens across Canada.

In keeping with these points, my personal preference is for a form of mixed member proportional (MMP). This is the type of system that most Canadian reports have recommended (e.g. the 2004 Law Commission report), and the New Zealand experience provides a compelling model for reform. My preferred variant would fill regional top-up seats using the runner-up system (borrowed from the German model).

This model keeps what's best about our current system, while adding proportionality and minimizing regional distortions. It's simple, provides direct representation, and avoids the sticky problem of party lists, which many find objectionable. In addition, it should help all parties by keeping some of their key people in the House of Commons, instead of losing them in close local races and being wiped out in a region, as we have seen happen to different parties, over several elections.

It is possible to implement this system in time for the 2019 election. One option would be to introduce the new system using 2011 boundaries and distributing the remaining 30 seats as top-ups. This would be a transitional step for the 2019 election, allowing time for the system to be modified to improve proportionality and the distribution of seats in time for the subsequent federal election.

It may be argued that this option isn't feasible because MMP is NDP policy. To this objection, I'd like to point out that the NDP didn't invent MMP. It is because almost all serious studies have recommended MMP for Canada that it's the model that has been adopted as NDP and Green Party policy. While the Green Party would definitely benefit – and deservedly so – the outcomes for the NDP could be more varied across the country. The important point is that it would be more fair to all parties.

MMP is a known quantity that works well in several jurisdictions, particularly Westminster democracies that have transitioned from First Past the Post (FPTP). I believe it is the best solution for Canada. However, if the committee is unable to agree to support an MMP system, several versions of a Canadian compromise could be acceptable to many supporters of proportional representation.

For example, the idea of multi-member urban district elections using Single Transferable Vote (STV) combined with single-member rural districts (using either FPTP or AV) has merit and would be uniquely Canadian. This may satisfy those who object to MMP on partisan grounds as well as the proponents of ranked ballots. However, it would be more complex and would mean that not all Canadians would elect

their representatives the same way. “Uniquely Canadian” also means it’s an unknown quantity that has not been tested in other jurisdictions.

Much has been made of the referendum question. Referenda were a significant part of the New Zealand process and I could support one under similar circumstances. However – given the government’s promise to replace FPTP by 2019 – I do not believe that a referendum on a proposal to be in place by 2019 is possible or desirable.

I support Minister Monsef’s position that a referendum is not the best tool for effectively consulting Canadians on complex issues, and is vulnerable to negative, partisan campaigning. If it may advance the possibility of reaching a Canadian compromise and a unanimous proposal for electoral reform, I suggest that the committee consider recommending a referendum or plebiscite to be held at some point in the future, following the implementation of the new system promised for 2019.

Finally, as input was requested on these points, I do not support mandatory voting (but do support greater engagement efforts by Elections Canada), and I do not believe that technology is sufficiently mature and secure enough to consider online voting at the present time (although it may be a useful tool for non-binding plebiscites). More thorough investigation of online voting technologies should be an important (and sufficiently resourced) part of Elections Canada’s mandate, with a view to introducing online voting in the future.

To add one last additional point, I strongly support lowering the voting age to 16. Young people study Civics in Grade 10 in Ontario. To many of them it seems very remote – something they can’t participate in, so it doesn’t hold their interest. I believe that youth voter turnout would improve overall if the habit can be instilled during the high-school years, and that the Civics curriculum would seem more relevant to those required to study it.

I wish the committee members productive discussions and collaboration over the coming busy months. I truly hope that partisan interests can be set aside and you will be able to craft a unanimous report recommending a new proportional electoral system that will serve all Canadians well.