

Personal Reflections and Recommendations on Electoral Reform

By Mike Polowick

This issue has inspired me to become more involved in Canadian politics than any other. I've written letters and signed online petitions in the past for FIPA, C-51, Northern Gateway, and other issues, but I've had a strong opinion that some form of proportional representation was needed in Canada for some time. Now that the government is seriously considering it, I'm not just upset and voicing my dissent, I am excited and optimistic that positive change could be coming soon. So I've attended community events, watched hearings and testimony presented to the ERRE online, and read submitted briefs by organizations like Fair Vote Canada and LeadNow.

After nearly a decade under a Conservative false majority government and watching the American hyper-partisan two-party system spiral into absurdity (with those trends becoming more pronounced in Canada), I am convinced our democracy is in real danger if it doesn't adapt. In our most recent election three out of five of the major parties ran with electoral reform as an element of their campaign platform. We have a real opportunity! Our choices now will leave a lasting legacy that affects how our government is formed and composed. My hope is that we will see more collaboration, healthier debate, and compromises that lead to more stable policies.

And so, after refining my views on this subject, and with the deadline for submissions from the public looming, I feel compelled to share my views with the committee.

A Recommended System of Proportional Representation

I appreciate that the committee's work has been as thorough as possible in a short time period but I hope its recommendation to the government will be specific so that they will be strongly motivated to follow it. From what I've read online and heard in person, I believe there is an overwhelming appetite for Proportional Representation of some kind. What shape that will take remains a significant question. My opinion is that a made-in-Canada solution that considers the unique situation our nation is in would be the best option. For that reason, I am mostly in favour of the Urban-Rural hybrid system proposed by Jean-Pierre Kingsley. In fact, I was very impressed with his testimony to the committee and hope that his views were all considered very seriously. Until I learned more about his proposed solution, I was leaning towards MMP, which I am also still a proponent of.

There are important trade-offs between closed and open list implementations of both of these systems but I have not decided which I prefer. I do believe it is important to keep the ballot simple. The technical aspects of how the votes are calculated and aggregated do not concern me significantly, and I think most Canadians could be convinced that the broad strokes are more important than the fine details. How people are required to cast their vote is one of those important aspects that will affect their feelings about any new system. Making a responsible, informed decision when voting

should not require excessive research – which may be necessary if there are a large number of candidates to choose from.

STV or other forms of PR would still be better than FPTP in my opinion, but my personal preference is for an Urban-Rural Hybrid or MMP system.

Educating the Public

A sentiment / complaint I have heard from a number of Canadians is that this process of consulting with the public has been too rushed, and has not included enough voices. I understand that Elections Canada needs significant lead time to prepare for a new voting system and so the clock is ticking if the government is going to keep its promise to make 2015 the last election under FPTP. However, to impose a new system for the next election and obtain support from the electorate for such a change, the public must understand the new system. Clearly explaining any system of Proportional Representation to an audience of 26 million or more is not going to be an easy task. I honestly hope that the government has already begun forming a strategy for this challenge and will allocate significant resources towards it.

I recommend very strongly that a public education campaign leverages "shareable" media that can be distributed online. Short videos would be extremely effective. New Zealand produced a fantastic video that I've seen on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/8Uk44aykGg4>) that explains their specific version of MMP in approximately two minutes. This is what Canada needs! Even if the same production company is contracted and they keep the Kiwi accents it would still be brilliant. Additionally, I recommend creating eye-catching infographics, short animated GIFs, and even meme-style images that target youth voters as an effective way to engage with Canadians online, in addition to articles in traditional media sources and pamphlets that can be handed out.

Referendum

Attending community events in person has exposed me to Canadians with opinions that vary from my own more significantly than the opinions I encounter online. I was surprised by how many strong voices there are for a referendum. My understanding is that a referendum is not legally required to change our voting system since it does not require a change to our constitution. The Liberals were elected with a mandate to fulfill their campaign promises, including electoral reform. However, the Liberals presently command a false majority in the House of Commons with only about 40% of the popular vote, which weakens that mandate. Considering that the NDP and the Green Party also campaigned on a platform that included electoral reform though, there appears to be a real majority of support in the House for reform and so I do not believe that a referendum is required in our system of representative democracy.

Then again, there may be some Liberal / NDP / Green supporters who do want a referendum. Also, there is a precedent in jurisdictions across Canada to have a

referendum when attempting to change our democracy in such a profound way. The government ignores the voices from the opposition that are calling for a referendum at their own peril.

Ultimately I believe the timeline is too short for a referendum. It may technically be possible to make the requisite changes to the Referendum Act and carry out a referendum in time for Elections Canada to prepare for a new system, but that would be extremely challenging and I do not believe it's possible to effectively educate the public about the new system in such a short period of time. If people don't understand it, the chances of it succeeding will be considerably diminished.

My suggestion then, is to promise a post-election referendum as a compromise. That referendum could offer three choices: keep the new system, revert to FPTP, or try a revised "Plan B" system of Proportional Representation (which could address concerns the public has about the system that was implemented for 2019). The argument for this novel approach is that it acknowledges the concerns of all Canadians and will allow voters to make a more informed decision since it is usually much easier to learn something new by doing it than by abstractly reading about or imagining it. This does break the established precedent for referendums on electoral reform, but those referendums have been almost entirely unsuccessful and I believe we should break that precedent now. Our democracy must evolve and it must do so quickly. We should be constantly striving to improve it, and while I expect this round of changes to be profound, in the future we should continue to iterate and refine our system. No system will be perfect, and mistakes are likely to be made, but if we continue to strive to do better, then we will progress. That should be our new precedent.

Voter Participation

Apart from changing our voting system, the ERRE is examining other ways to improve our electoral system with the goal of increasing voter participation. I believe that making all votes count (as much as possible) by enacting PR is a major factor in convincing Canadians to vote. Another way to make all votes count would be to restore the federal "per-vote subsidy" or "government allowance" model of political financing.

I do not support mandatory voting measures. I feel very strongly that it is a right, not a duty, in our society to vote. Imposing a punishment on people for not showing up to vote will disproportionately affect the less fortunate in our society and likely lead to other unintended consequences like resentment, defiance and the "donkey vote". It would be more effective to institute more incentives to vote, or reduce obstacles by making Election Day a national holiday.

Online voting may be possible to implement securely, but I believe it would be incredibly costly to do so which is why I do not support it. The stakes are too high to fail, so it is absolutely necessary to proceed very carefully. The greatest expense will not be for equipment or infrastructure; it will be for expertise. To ensure end-to-end security, the best and brightest digital security experts will be needed. With the state of

online security as it is presently, the best and brightest are going to be in very high demand and are not likely to be available for this project – certainly not immediately, and certainly not for an average contract.

If the goal is to increase voter participation by making it easier to vote, then I don't understand why the committee is not seriously considering simply expanding the ability for Canadians to choose to vote by mail. The system already exists, in fact I have myself voted by mail when I lived abroad. I believe that it is secure and verifiable – there is a physical paper copy that can be recounted if necessary. I know that some of the states in the USA utilize voting by mail, including Washington and Oregon, so it can be considered a proven and tested system that people can trust. For Canadians in remote locations, or with mobility issues, this option would very likely encourage increased participation.

I have heard mixed opinions about lowering the voting age, but I think that 18 remains a reasonable age to be granted the right to vote. That does not mean that minors should be excluded from the process – they are all future voters and politicians would benefit from understanding that. I think that all high schools should conduct elections along with the rest of the public, even if the results do not officially count. It is a perfect opportunity for students to learn by doing, and to establish a habit for voting. Candidates should visit high schools and acknowledge the opportunity to engage with potential future supporters. Hosting debates between competing candidates is an especially effective way to involve students since they can be more dramatic. I speak from personal experience in this case as I was fortunate enough to attend a debate at my high school between competing candidates in my electoral district in Calgary and it left a powerful and lasting impression on me and many of my classmates.

I will admit that I am unfamiliar with the challenges that First Nations Canadians face with respect to participating in our elections, but I think it's important to encourage their inclusion as much as possible and that outreach programs should focus on practical information regarding how to vote and resources to make that as easy as possible.

Conclusion

I truly believe that this moment is a huge opportunity that may not come again for a generation. Canada is a great country, but "better is always possible". We have to try. If we stumble or if we fail, we will try again. If we listen to the experts among us like JP Kingsley, and the concerns and values of everyday Canadians, then I'm sure we will advance our electoral system, our democracy, and our society.

Thank you for giving Canadians this opportunity to express our views.

Sincerely,

Mike Polowick

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