

BRIEF ON ELECTORAL REFORM

Summary of Coffee Dialogue from Sept 10/2016

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Summary of our Coffee Dialogue

1. What was the nature of the event? Coffee Dialogue
2. What date was the event held? September 10, 2016
3. Where was the event held and who hosted the event? Dustin Su and Jasmine Yu's apartment in the riding of Willowdale
4. Number of attendees: Seven (all professionals in our mid-thirties)
5. Brief description of event: "Coffee dialogue" among friends to discuss federal electoral reform

Our coffee dialogue was structured into five topics that were considered in relation to the ERRE's Five Principles for Electoral Reform (effectiveness and legitimacy, engagement, accessibility and inclusiveness, integrity, local representation). We believe the core purpose of electoral reform is to address the distortions in Canadian federal election outcomes. There was consensus that it is unacceptable for a party winning less than 50% of the popular vote to hold majority governments that do not represent the values of the majority of the electorate. Lack of public awareness of the national engagement process was another concern as so few citizens are aware that public consultations are taking place. Finally our group did not reach consensus on whether the multi-party nature of the ERRE committee's recommendations would legitimize the government's approach to electoral reform without a referendum. Below are some highlights of our discussion:

Our existing electoral system (First past-the-post, FPTP)

In review of the positives and negatives of our existing system, the principle of effectiveness was considered. In majority government outcomes, FPTP produce stable governments that can implement their policy agenda over a fixed amount of time. Another positive is the ability for the electorate to remove a poorly performing party from power at time of election.

However, the group agreed legitimacy is a major concern because the FPTP system has historically allowed majority governments to be formed with less than 50% of popular support. This distortion potentially gives the controlling party the ability to implement a long-term agenda at odds with the will of the majority of the electorate. Strategic voting is another outcome of FPTP that creates distortions in election results. FPTP incentivizes voters to support candidates that do not necessarily align with their own values in order to defeat a less desirable candidate or strategically vote in order not to waste a vote.

In terms of engagement, the group agreed that FPTP leads to adversarial politics with unnecessary/nonsensical critiques of policy, lack of cooperation and unconstructive behaviour conducted in the interest of attracting voters instead of making effective policy decisions. Furthermore, while FPTP produces stability in majority situations, minority governments elected from the FPTP system have the potential to be highly partisan, adversarial and unstable leading to repeated elections over a short time horizon.

Discussing the potential electoral systems (Alternative Vote - AV, Mixed-member-proportional - MMP, Single-transferrable vote - STV)

Upon review of the potential electoral systems, the group agreed that all three options would address the deficiencies of the FPTP system. AV, STV and MMP all have methods of incentivizing voters to choose candidates that reflect their values.

When considering the systems, there was no consensus on which system is the best. However the group agreed on some of the key features:

- Producing election results where the proportion of seats a political party earns is in close proportion to the percentage of votes cast for that party
- Ensuring the ballot and method for counting seats is easy to understand especially for the purpose of public education
- Ensuring local representation where a local MP is accountable to the voter that elects them

Public engagement and education

According to an IPSOS poll released on August 31, 2016, only one in five polled were aware that public consultations were taking place and only 3% of all polled were closely following the national engagement process. We believe that the government has done a poor job promoting awareness of the national engagement process and educating the public about the new potential electoral systems. We recommend that once the ERRE committee decides upon a new system, the government should invest heavily in public awareness, education and further consultation so the electorate fully understands the proposed system. Public education is critical for the new system to truly be legitimate in the eyes of public.

Here are a few suggestions for how the government could better engage the public:

- Prime Minister Trudeau could publicly promote the national engagement process through mainstream and social media.
- Utilize the CBC as the centerpiece for public discourse. Assign a media personality to be the champion of public engagement and create dedicated time and space on television, radio and online for public engagement, discourse and education.
- Better advertising of town halls and other public forums of discourse.
- Better educational resources and synopsis of the evidence being presented to the ERRE committee.

Steps to implementing a new electoral system

Once the ERRE Committee submits their final report in December the government will need to decide what to do with the recommendations. The group was divided on whether the government should pass

legislation based on the recommendations, put the recommendations to a referendum, or an alternative method to legitimize the change in the hearts of the electorate.

Dialogue participants that are in favour of the government passing legislation justify this approach because the ERRE committee recommendations require a multi-party majority. In addition, if the Liberals support an electoral system that would theoretically hurt their chances at a majority government in the 2019 election; it could legitimize the belief that they are acting in the best interest of the country as opposed to the interests of their own party in the eyes of some of the electorate.

Dialogue participants that are opposed to the government passing legislation without a referendum believe that the political parties will always put their self-interest ahead of the interests of the country. They believe that the only way to truly legitimize the new chosen electoral system is to put the committee's recommendations to a referendum.

A number of questions around the referendum were discussed. One opponent of the referendum expressed that Canada does not have a strong history either federally or provincially of referendums and change through referendum questions. Another concern was the electorate being uninformed or misinformed about the new system causing them to stick with the "devil they know". One supporter of the referendum believed the referendum should have two questions:

- 1) "Should we change our election system or not?"
- 2) If the answer was yes, "Do you support changing to the system recommended by the ERRE committee?"

Other ideas included:

- Giving voters a second "mock ballot" using the new system in the 2019 election then holding a referendum after this test balloting.
- Changing the system before the 2019 election and subsequently holding a referendum after the election to poll the electorate on whether to keep the new system or revert back to FPTP.
- Conduct further research into how other countries that have changed their systems consulted and educated the electorate prior to the change.
- Stick with FPTP for the 2019 election and hold the referendum at that time. Implement the result for the following election.

Accessibility issues (mandatory and online voting)

After initial discussion, the group agreed that voting should be a voluntary exercise. Statistics on voter turnout is valuable information on how engaged the electorate is. As opposed to mandatory voting, more resources should be put into improving engagement and inclusiveness. One example would be having Elections Canada go door-to-door before an election to ensure all potential voters are captured on voter lists.

While some were in favour of online voting because it would improve accessibility and convenience, others had concerns with integrity as it could be difficult to ensure voters are not pressured by others

when making their decisions. Voting in person ensures voter privacy and the maintenance of a secret ballot.