

Could Deliberative Polling Fill a Gap in the Public Consultation Process?

Submitted by the National Capital Region Chapter of Fair Vote Canada

Summary

This submission by the National Capital Region chapter of Fair Vote Canada is meant to supplement the brief submitted by Fair Vote Canada's National Council. It is not our intention to repeat any of the material included in that brief, which we support in its entirety.

We hope instead to add some value by focusing on a subject that has been of particular interest to our chapter: finding a more structured way to consult with ordinary Canadians about what they are looking for in our electoral system.

Should any further consultations with Canadians be recommended as part of the ERRE set of recommendations on December 1, we suggest that some form of deliberative polling be considered as an option.

We do not favour a referendum to validate a reform bringing in proportional representation because we feel that increasing the fairness of our electoral system is an ethically and democratically obvious choice that does not need to be put to a referendum.

However, some sort of deliberative polling, using a structure sample of the population might be considered as an addition to the repertoire of consultations adopted to date provided it can be done without delaying the implementation of proportional representation in Canada. Our chapter of Fair Vote Canada has designed and tested a questionnaire that could provide some inspiration.

Our main purpose in submitting this brief is to encourage the committee and the government to consider using a questionnaire instrument of this sort, using a structured sampling technique and a deliberative polling approach that would provide an opportunity for citizens to learn and exchange ideas before answering the questionnaire.

Of course the precise questions about voter preferences for different electoral system options would need to be adjusted in light of recommendations emerging from the ERRE Committee on Dec. 1.

The consultation process to date

Of all the ways that the Canadian public might be consulted on the subject of electoral reform, the process to date can be praised for its ability to hear from experts and from Canadians who care the most about this issue - those who care enough to educate themselves and to express their voice by participating in town halls, submitting briefs or answering the ERRE questionnaire online. We have no problem with this approach. While it gives a disproportionate voice to those who care the most about the issue, we feel that the existence of a minority of voters who feel severely disenfranchised by the current electoral system should be reason enough for reforming that system.

The question remains about how best to gauge the views of the general public on what they are looking for in an electoral system.

- How much do people care that majority governments in Canada are normally elected with only about 40% of the votes?
- How much do they care that representation across the country is heavily Liberal in the Atlantic Provinces, heavily Conservative in the prairies and heavily NDP on Vancouver Island, with little to no representation from other parties?
- How much do they care that the share of seats in the House are different from a party's share of the vote?
- How predisposed are they to want majority governments whether or not this is based on a majority of the vote?
- How much do they care about having a single MP to represent them rather than several as would be the case in a proportional system?

Citizens do not need to be experts in order to answer such questions.

In our view, the critical choice facing Canadians today is not whether to replace one majoritarian with another (AV instead of FPTP), nor whether to bring in mandatory voting or electronic voting, because none of these options would rectify the fundamental inequities of our current electoral system. The real choice in front of us as citizens ("real change") is whether to replace FPTP with PR.

AV would change little and would risk further entrenching our system as a majoritarian one that would make it even more difficult for new political parties to emerge and challenge the system. As for mandatory voting and electronic voting, we consider those to be important subjects that can be discussed on their own without distracting from the essential issue at hand, which is to make 2015 the last FPTP election.

If one relies on the testimony of experts and on what we have heard in most town halls across the country, the conclusion is clear. The vast majority of experts expressing an

opinion (over 80% by our count so far) have called for PR as a better option for Canada, and Canadians have echoed that call with passion and determination.

Yet the Conservative Party of Canada and the Bloc Québécois continue to clamour that a referendum would be needed to give legitimacy to a change of this magnitude in our electoral system. We disagree with this position for one reason in particular, namely that one does not need a referendum to make the electoral system considerably fairer than it currently is. We think that this is democratically and ethically obvious provided that the proposed reform is in fact a fair one recognized as such. One does not need a referendum to confirm something that is ethically obvious and fair.

What we would like to suggest, if there is a need for further validation and legitimacy, would be to canvas a representative sample of the population in a more systematic way on a range of questions relating to what citizens are looking for in an electoral system.

We could take this one step further and inquire into the choice of electoral system options. However, this would require a more deliberative approach allowing average Canadians to develop a greater level of expertise - a deliberative polling or study circles approach.

Pre-testing of a deliberative polling questionnaire

Fair Vote Canada's chapter in the National Capital Region undertook to pre-test a survey questionnaire that would be useful in this context. The bulk of this questionnaire emphasizes the types of features that citizens would like to see in an electoral system. This is followed by a set of questions about specific reform options. The questionnaire was tested for the first time on July 27 at an event in Ottawa's Lansdowne Park.

The assembled public was a PR-friendly one, and we make no pretense that this was a representative sample of the Canadian public. However, the exercise did serve a number of purposes:

- It confirmed that the questionnaire could be filled out fairly quickly and confirmed its feasibility, despite its apparent lengthiness. Some participants - around 30 according to a straw poll - who had found the questionnaire on their chairs when they arrived, had finished completing it by the time the event began.
- The event clarified which features were considered most important by the assembly and helped to measure the strength of people's convictions
- It enabled us to refine the questionnaire and to test two different ways of applying the questionnaire - in hard copy or online using a Google Form.

A detailed report on the results of the Lansdowne Park event is available separately in Google Doc format by following [the following link](#). One can also find there all of the

questions included in the questionnaire and graphs of the range of responses in each case. At the end are the often extensive qualitative responses provided by participants.

As noted, the questionnaire was then revised. Here is [a link to the printable version of the latest incarnation \(available in French as well, here\)](#) and [a link for trying it out using Google Forms](#) (not yet available in French).

The revised questionnaire has since been applied elsewhere, and the ERRE can expect to receive other briefs detailing the result of its application in other settings. However, the general tenor of the questions is the same and results from the Lansdowne Park survey remain of interest. We offer some key observations about those results in the annex of this brief.

Recommendation

Our main purpose in submitting this brief is to encourage the committee and the government to consider the use of a questionnaire such as this one using a structured sample technique and a deliberative polling approach that would allow citizens the opportunity to learn and exchange ideas before answering the questionnaire.

In Lansdowne Park, the educational component involved:

- presentations from Nathan Cullen, Elizabeth May and a representative of Fair Vote Canada who spoke to the questionnaire,
- distribution of [a handout](#) about the different systems alluded to in the last part of the questionnaire (English only), and
- an open-mic session for questions and other forms of intervention.

This approach would need to be refined, but did allow us to test the concept and the value of the questionnaire.

We believe that the implementation of this recommendation could be assigned to an independent organization with some experience in deliberative polling. Resources assigned to the project would have to be sufficient to apply the questionnaire on a cross-country basis.

In our view, this sort of approach would be superior to a referendum as a way of gauging public opinion, because it asks a wide range of questions, allows for qualitative answers (not just a yes/no response), and because it offers respondents an opportunity to deliberate before answering the questionnaire.

Annex: Responses from Lansdowne Park

The event featured two members of the Electoral Reform Committee (ERRE), Elizabeth May and Nathan Cullen along with a member of Fair Vote Canada who introduced the questionnaire. The event attracted a standing room only crowd of about 140 people. It was intended to be consultative in nature, and a considerable amount of time was left for open-mic commentary. However, the prime consultative instrument was the questionnaire. Of the 85 who responded, 32 did so online just after the event. These responses tended to have the most elaborate qualitative responses

This was a group of people with a special interest in voting reform. Two thirds of respondents indicated that they supported the NDP or the Green Party in 2015; the balance (28%) expressed support for the Liberal Party. Twenty-seven percent of those responding to the questionnaire said they had voted strategically in 2015.

It was a knowledgeable group of people, with 81% saying that they understood our current FPTP system very well or quite well (54% and 27% respectively). Understanding of alternatives to FPTP was not so high however. The share saying that they were familiar or very familiar with the four alternatives outlined were 56% for the Alternative Vote system; 48% for MMP, 45% for STV and only 26% for the rural-urban hybrid option.

Asked how much they cared about the issue of electoral reform, 96% of respondents said that they cared a great deal or that it was of “utmost importance” This is a significant result illustrating that there is a segment of the Canadian population that feels very strongly about electoral reform and proportional representation more specifically.

Forty-eight percent of respondents considered that our current political system is “profoundly undemocratic” Another 42% contented themselves with a response that it was “problematic.” Such an indictment of our democratic system suggests a problem that needs to be fixed. None of the respondents considered it to be a good thing that majority governments could be formed in Canada without acquiring a majority of the popular vote in favour of the winning party.

Perhaps more surprising were the strong results in favour of a government being “obliged to consult with other parties and make compromises.” This preference was chosen by fully 94% of respondents; 6% chose “Don’t know” and no-one at all picked “A government with a majority able to pass legislation without the support of other parties.”

Principles and Values

Respondents were asked to comment on 22 possible criteria, grouped according to the five sets of principles included in the ERRE’s mandate. Some of these could best be

described as “features” of an electoral system or as outcomes that the choice of an electoral system might generate. Respondents were asked to rank each criterion from 0 (“no importance at all”) to 4 (“of fundamental importance”).

Readers may consider each item separately [on line](#). We offer some general observations here:

Four criteria were included under the heading of **Effectiveness and Legitimacy**. These have to do with fairness and equality, and all rated very highly as shown in the bar graphs.

This was followed by six criteria under the heading of **Voter Engagement**. Among these, civility and coalitions also scored very highly. Civility is obviously a strong value for this group, which also seems to have no reservation about coalition governments. As between governments led by a majority with or without a majority of the vote and coalition governments representing a majority of voters, the balance of opinion was overwhelmingly in favour of the latter.

Criteria having to do with the number of parties represented in Parliament yielded results that reflect a positive but somewhat cautious attitude regarding the most desirable level of diversity of party representation in the house, combined with very strong opposition to a two-party solution (with 80% giving a “0” to a model encouraging the dominance of two major parties).

One detects a slightly higher divergence of views under the heading of **Accessibility and Inclusiveness**, although there are no particular surprises here. Making voting as easy as possible for voters clearly does well. However we feel that any system being put forward can be made relatively easy for voters. It is the design and management of the system which may be more complicated in one case or another.

The two “**Integrity**” criteria do amazingly well, with almost everyone putting a “4” for both these criteria. Of course the second of these was actually a restatement of the voter equality principle (added here because it affects the integrity of the system as a whole), so this result is consistent with what we saw earlier.

Finally come seven criteria that one can identify in some way with the “**Local Representation**” theme of the ERRE. What emerges here is the relatively low importance that respondents gave to this general theme. Given a choice, respondents clearly prefer a system of multi-member representation to one that is reliant on single-member seats (as one can see from the first two questions). The other five criteria in this category suggest that respondents give a lot of importance to features of government that one would normally expect to do well under proportional representation (proportionality at a regional level, not just nationally; due attention of MPs to national

policy issues; a long-term policy perspective; electing the best people from each party; and avoiding large policy swings from one government to another),

Systems

Part 3 of the questionnaire was intended to sound out respondents' views on different options for Canada using a two-step approach similar to the one used in the first New Zealand referendum in 1993. The first step was to ask respondents if they preferred to keep FPTP, keep a single-member riding system with ranked ballots added to it, or switch to a proportional system. The response to this question was virtually unanimous, with only one respondent out of 78 selecting FPTP, three selecting ranked ballots with single-member ridings and 74 selecting PR.

Just as remarkable were the choices made by respondents among the three PR options on offer. Respondents were not asked to choose among these options, but rather to rate each one from 0 to 4. Responses were varied, but generally positive for each of these three options. The MMP option did best overall, with an average rating of 2.4, but a quick glance at the results for the STV and hybrid options suggest that these options should not be discounted. There is no clear "winner" here.

Compulsory voting and online voting

This version of the questionnaire did not ask about compulsory voting and online voting. However, the revised questionnaire adds a question about each of these.

Also new in the revised version of the questionnaire since Lansdowne Park is a separate section at the end where information on control variables is collected.

Other changes were made to the order of some questions and some tweaking of the language to ensure neutrality.