

Brief for the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

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Summary

I support replacing our First Past the Post electoral system with a proportional system. Either Mixed-Member Proportional, Single Transferrable Vote, or Rural-Urban Proportional would be acceptable systems. I do not support having a referendum on this issue.

Problems with First Past the Post

First Past the Post has a number of problems:

Wasted Votes

Under FPTP, many people vote for somebody who does not get elected to Parliament. In a sense, their votes are wasted. Adding up these votes across the country, roughly 50% of all votes in Canada are wasted. We could dramatically reduce this by changing to a proportional system. Other countries that use proportional representation have closer to 5% of their votes wasted. This would lead to more satisfied voters.

Strategic Voting

Because of the possibility of wasting their vote, many voters chose not to vote sincerely for a candidate with a low probability of winning. Instead they vote strategically for a more popular candidate, usually in the hopes of keeping some other, less desired, candidate from winning. A proportional voting system would reduce the need for strategic voting, because there is a greater chance that a sincere vote would help elect the preferred candidate or party.

Regional Distortions

Because of the way votes are distributed, the balance between parties in certain regions is greatly distorted compared to their share of the vote. For example, in the 2015 federal election, 100% of the seats in Atlantic Canada went to the Liberal Party, while the prairie provinces elected mostly Conservative candidates. These lopsided outcomes did not reflect the way people voted. They exacerbate the regional divisions in our country and create a self-fulfilling sense of polarization.

Extreme and Unstable Policies

Under First Past the Post, a party can often form a majority government with a minority of the votes. With this false mandate, they can pass laws that only they support, and enforce policies in the manner that they see fit, without having to resort to "the quaint expedient of winning the argument." These laws and policies may well be opposed by a majority of voters, leading to distrust of the government. When another party forms government, they often spend the first part of their mandate overturning some of those laws and reversing various policies.

A proportional voting system would lead to more coalitions, where parties would have to compromise on laws and policies that more voters could live with. These laws would be less likely to be overturned by the next government, as they better would reflect the preferences of the median voter.

Proportional Representation and the Five Guiding Principles

Besides correcting the above problems, proportional representation offers a number of benefits related to the five principles in the committee's mandate.

Effectiveness and Legitimacy

Proportional representation would increase public confidence among Canadians that their vote is fairly translated into representation in the House of Commons. It reduces distortion in electoral outcomes, and strengthens the link between voter intention and the election of representatives. Governments that have as power in Parliament that is proportional to their support among the voting public will be seen as more legitimate.

Engagement

By making every vote count, and making every voter feel represented, proportional representation

would encourage voting and participation in the political process. It would foster greater civility in Parliament because parties would end up working together in coalitions and creating compromises. Because of the lower regional distortion in extreme electoral outcomes, proportional representation would enhance social cohesion across the country. It would offer opportunities for inclusion to people who identify with smaller parties, and people who have values or ideas that may not have a place in an existing party, but which could find electoral support under a proportional system.

Accessibility and Inclusiveness

Proportional voting systems are used all over the world (e.g., in 25 out of 34 of the OECD countries), and voting is simple enough to be understood by voters everywhere.

Integrity

Proportional representation can enhance public trust in the system when voters see their votes reflected in the overall makeup of Parliament. As with the current system, Elections Canada can publish the results and voters can verify that the outcome was aligned with the votes cast. This process may be more involved for a proportional system than for First Past the Post, but it will certainly be reliable and deterministic.

Local Representation

Many proportional systems (such as Mixed-Member Proportional and Single Transferrable Vote) include local representatives. Voters will have one or several MPs who represent their community and understand their local conditions. Voters will have local access to these MPs (just as under the current system) and can ensure accountability to them through local consultation and ultimately through their vote.

If a proportional system has ridings with multiple representatives (as in STV), then local representation is enhanced. More voters will have voted directly for somebody who got elected in their riding. Further, more citizens will be able to find one of their local representatives who agrees with them on an issue.

Which Proportional System is Best

There are many good proportional voting systems, and almost any of them would be better than our current First Past the Post system. For instance, Mixed-Member Proportional and Single

Transferable Vote are used in other countries and have been suggested for Canada, and either of them would serve us well. The rural-urban proportional system proposed by Fair Vote Canada would work well for Canada given our regional makeup. I will resist the temptation here to propose yet another new system of my own. I would be happy to vote under any of the three systems I have just mentioned. Though they involve different trade-offs and are not perfect, any one of them would be a great improvement over the current system.

A Referendum is a Poor Way to Make This Decision

The Conservative Party campaigned in the last election with a promise to make any change to the electoral system require a referendum. Although they did not form government and pass such a law, such a referendum is being considered, to give legitimacy to the decision of the committee and the eventual law passed by Parliament. I would argue that the power of Parliament to pass laws is legitimacy enough. In the past, we have changed many fundamental things about elections without referendums: for example, extending the franchise to Chinese people (1898), schoolteachers (1898), women (1917), and Mennonites (1920), among others; adding (2004) and then removing (2015) per-vote subsidies to political parties; reducing the ability of Elections Canada to investigate electoral fraud (2015); and even changing the voting system (in British Columbia in 1952 and 1953). Given the nature of our representative democracy, and the fact that the governing party campaigned on a promise to change the voting system, changing the voting system through a vote in Parliament is legitimate. The extensive public consultation and the party makeup of the committee add to this legitimacy.

Moreover, referendums are a poor way to make political decisions in practice. The political elite decide the framing of the issues and the formulation of the question posed, which makes the participation of the public less meaningful than it first appears. The details of an issue are usually simplified and distorted so that the referendum becomes a debate about more abstract values, and about support for the current government. Generally both sides of the issue are exaggerated, and this leads to polarization rather than discussion. A referendum is a blunt tool, and political decisions rely on informed debate and compromise.

Recommendation

Canada should switch away from First Past the Post and use a proportional representation electoral system instead.