

Brief to the House of Commons Special Committee on Electoral Reform

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Honourable Members of the House of Commons Special Committee on Electoral Reform, I write this brief to you concerning your interest in potentially replacing our first-past-the-post system with an alternative voting system. 'Mandatory voting', 'online voting' and 'lowering the voting age' are outside the scope of this particular brief and therefore will be ignored.

Introduction: Our first-past-the-post system was inherited from and modelled after the British first-past-the-post system before our Confederation in 1867. We have largely retained this system since then, partly out of consideration for the advantages such a system is designed to provide. Our system is meant to provide local representation in parliament through elected members of parliament. Ideally, they represent the ridings they are elected by, but in practice this is complicated by our political culture of strict party discipline. As such, the benefits of local representation in parliament is weakened while retaining the negatives of the system. Another selling point of first-past-the-post, majority governments, is inconsistent as evidenced by the last decade. 'Strategic/tactical voting' discourage voting for preferred candidates (parties) and while those who do face the issue of potentially “wasting” their vote on a candidate who has a very high probability of losing or winning. Voter confidence in our system is furthered marred by the potential of a party 'gerrymandering' the system in their favor. A system of closed-list proportional representation would be easily compatible with current political culture in Parliament and would remove most of the issues that plague our FPTP system.

Honourable Committee members, the parliament's culture of strict party discipline, which results in Members rarely voting against the desires of their respective political party they belong to, is contradictory to the principle **local representation** that is being used to examine potential alternatives to FPTP. Currently, a Liberal MP representing a riding in BC is very likely to vote the same way as a Liberal MP from Atlantic Canada, Quebec and Ontario on the same bill, even if such a bill would not be beneficial to their riding due to how strong our party discipline is. Ultimately members, irrespective of political affiliation, are representatives of their parties interests first and foremost in Parliament. Their respective parties may be actively pushing for policies which best represent their ridings, but the diversity of Canada's regions, politically, economically and culturally, necessarily lead to Members failing to vote for the interests of their ridings or even vote against them. This system of party discipline, to it's credit, does make it easier to hold a political party to account if it's members vote according to party line nearly all of the time. Rightly or wrongly, this is an aspect of our democracy that has grown out of our practice of Responsible Government and is one that cannot easily be legislated away. Rather than working against this and potentially changing our political landscape drastically and potentially undermine Responsible Government, the Committee ought to reconsider the importance of this principle of **local representation** beyond the degree to which local areas are currently represented in Parliament.¹

In consideration of the limitations FPTP has due to our political culture, a closed-list proportional representation system would be highly compatible with how regions are currently represented by Canadian political parties (namely, by the party and not by particular members that belong to the party). In this regard, it would be a safe and stable alternative to FPTP as individual Members would formally serve the role in parliament that they currently do informally. Further, transitioning to closed-list proportional representation system would make voting more **accessible** by simplifying the process voters decide on who to vote for. If the average MP will vote according to party line as often as they currently do, then what is the value in knowing anything about those particular candidates and their platforms? If this is abstracted from the political process, it also opens the door to a more **inclusive** parliament. If parties rank potential MPs on a list, and MPs are selected from that list,

1 Parliament of Canada, Party Discipline and Free Votes, 2006, Electronic Document

than considerations such as age, sex, ethnicity and religion need not complicate the process for which a party's candidate for parliament is decided. By making our process more **inclusive**, we can thus offer more opportunities for underrepresented groups to be **engaged** in the political process. This can result in a greater number of MPs which are women or minorities, making the composition of parliament more reflective of Canada's demographical composition.²

Voter satisfaction and **engagement** is discouraged by two closely related issues. As a consequence of the candidate with these most votes winning everything (the seat in the House of Commons that is being contested over), every single vote beyond what is needed to elect the 'winner' of a riding has no value to that candidate or the party they belong to. Conversely every vote that goes to a 'loser' of a riding has no value to the candidate or party they belong to. These create the phenomenon of 'wasted votes' where an individual vote has, in practice, no value. This unfairly and severely punishes parties that have broad support across the country, but lack strong local support or even parties with strong national support, but poor local support. A consequence of this is 'strategic/tactical voting'. A voter, in order to minimize the risk of their vote being 'wasted' may instead vote for one of the two most popular candidates that they most prefer, even if they generally dislike the platforms of either party. How democratic is it if our voting system, in practice, discourages a voter from voting for anything other than the two most popular political parties?

Some alternatives to FPTP, such as a 'mixed-member proportional system' or a 'single transferable vote system' retain this problem to varying degrees. A closed-list proportional representation system would largely eliminate or alleviate this problem as far fewer votes can be 'wasted' and thus removes the incentive to vote 'strategically/tactically'. If one feels as if their vote will more consistently elect a member of a political party they support, then surely one will be less dissatisfied with the political process and thus more **engaged**. While 'gerrymandering' isn't a significant concern in federal elections, a closed-list proportional representation system would be immune to this in virtue of it lacking ridings whose borders can be manipulated for the gain of some particular party. A trivial conclusion can be drawn from this that no accusations of bias in drawing electoral districts can be made if there are no electoral districts to begin with. A closed-list system would thus enhance public trust in the **integrity** of our election process.

Proportional representation may be criticized for failing to produce majority governments and fracturing the political system due to a plethora of parties and coalitions in a national legislature, but these concerns can be mitigated or even eliminated with a sufficiently high threshold for entering Parliament. Regardless of the method used for distributing seats, the threshold for which a party qualifies for entering parliament can be determined politically (instead of being a natural result of the mathematical formula) and raised such that it is impossible for there to be more than x number of parties represented in Parliament. A threshold of 3.5% can result in more fair outcomes (such that underrepresented parties such as the Green Party would receive significantly more seats than the one they currently hold) without resulting in dozens of parties being represented in parliament. Higher thresholds (such as 5%) would produce even more politically stable outcomes. Our current system is still prone to failing to produce majority governments and can result in frequent elections. From 2004-2011 has held four federal elections due to minority governments being defeated by non-confidence motions. Proportional representation could be adapted for more stable outcomes (higher thresholds) while being more fair than first-past-the-post and simpler. Closed-list proportional representation can still retain **integrity** and democratic **legitimacy** while reducing the distortion between the popular vote and the outcome of federal elections.

² Law Commission of Canada, *Voting Counts: Electoral Reform for Canada*, 2004, p. 10.

For these reasons, I recommend that the Committee consider closed-list proportional representation as a fairer and simpler voting system that better achieves the principles set out in the motion adopted by the House of Commons on Tuesday, June 7 2016 than first-past-the-post while being an easy system to transition to given our political culture.