

Kanata, Ontario

October 6, 2016

Special Committee on Electoral Reform
Sixth Floor, 131 Queen Street
House of Commons
Ottawa ON K1A 0A6
Canada

Dear Honourable Members of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform:

Thank you for your work studying this important issue. As Canadians we have an opportunity before us to achieve voter equality, and I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to your consultations during this exciting time. I would like to present the following points for the committee's consideration:

1. The current first-past-the-post system is overly simplistic, unfair, fails to adequately capture the preferences of Canadians, and needs replacing;
2. Ranked ballots are an important tool in designing a more appropriate system, but simply applying them to single-member districts *does not* address the problems with our current system;
3. A proportional system that maintains local representation *does* address the problems with our current system;
4. A geographic (rural-urban) hybrid of proportional systems may best address Canada's unique electoral system requirements;
5. Sufficient cross-partisan support may obviate the need for a referendum, but if one is called, it must be accompanied by extensive public education and strict third-party spending limits and advertising standards. A referendum held after a "trial period" of several elections under the new system may lead to a better-informed decision.

1. First-past-the-post needs to change

While first-past-the-post (FPTP) may have been appropriate for the geographic, sociopolitical, and technological reality in which it was created, that reality has long since passed. The flaws of this system in our modern context have been well chronicled by others, and I will not elaborate them in significant detail here. Suffice it to say that first-past-the-post systematically discriminates against those with minority preferences in a given electoral district, disproportionately favours regional parties over those with comparable support bases spread evenly across the country, creates "safe" ridings with constituent bases that can be effectively ignored during election campaigns, encourages divisive winner-take-all campaign styles, and enables a minority of electors to choose a majority of MPs who then have total control in the House of Commons.

Defenders of FPTP suggest that we need to keep voting simple, and that any change would be unbearably complicated. I would suggest that our current system is not merely simple - it is simplistic. FPTP collects the minimum possible amount of information from voters - a single mark on a single ballot. FPTP's simplicity was no doubt practical in the days when voting consisted of landowning white men choosing from one of two parties before the results were delivered on horseback: thankfully, our electorate has evolved to encompass a much broader and diverse range of opinions, values, and political preferences. To properly reflect this rich diversity of thought in our democratic institutions, our electoral system needs to evolve in step.

2. Single-member-districts with ranked ballots is not an improvement

Adopting an Alternative Vote (AV) system in which existing electoral districts are maintained and ballots are augmented to allow for a preferential ordering of candidates is admittedly tempting for its convenience of implementation. However, this system does not address the problems with FPTP, and in some cases may worsen distortions between a party's overall share of the vote and their representation in Parliament. The AV system should *not* be considered as a viable alternative to FPTP.

This is not an argument against introducing the ability to rank candidates in order of preference on a ballot. I strongly support ranked ballots as a tool for gathering richer information about electoral preferences, and for encouraging a productive, inclusive, and positive campaign style instead of a focus on divisive tactics aimed at obtaining merely the absolute minimum number of votes required to win a plurality. What's more, AV is a perfectly appropriate choice when electing only a single individual (for example, a party leader): its problems are only relevant when resolving multiple simultaneous elections in single-member, winner-take-all districts.

3. The right proportional system can increase fairness and accountability

I strongly believe that Canada should replace FPTP with a proportional system that maintains local representation. As you know, there are many possible systems that fit this description, most notably mixed-member-proportional (MMP) and single transferable vote (STV): both are fine systems with proven track records, and while I personally find STV to be the more elegant of the two, I recognize that implementing it effectively in many of Canada's already-large rural electoral districts could pose a significant challenge (as outlined in the next section, a combination of both of these approaches may best address this issue).

While implementation details most certainly matter, I would suggest that almost *any* proportional system maintaining local representation would effectively address the committee's five reference principles for electoral reform:

1. Effectiveness and legitimacy: By definition, a proportional system reduces distortions between voter intention and the election of representatives (while a majoritarian system such as AV does not).
2. Engagement: Under a proportional system, all voters have an equal opportunity to contribute to the democratic process, regardless of where they live or who they choose to vote for. More people vote when they know their vote counts: this point was made by many witnesses appearing before the committee over the summer. A proportional systems would also eliminate false majorities in Parliament, requiring politicians to collaborate across partisan lines to introduce more broadly supported legislation, increasing stability and reducing costly policy reversals with every change in government.
3. Accessibility and inclusiveness: Obtaining a richer understanding of the political preferences of the electorate will inevitably require allowing a more thoughtful voting experience than is possible with FPTP's simplistic ballot. However, the process would by no means need to be complicated: in fact, in many cases a voter choosing not to leverage the full expressive power of their ballot may be able to vote in much the same way as they have in the past (for example, choosing only a first choice on a ranked STV ballot).
4. Integrity: The requirements for maintaining privacy and security for a proportional system would be no different than they are for FPTP. While electronic tabulation may be desirable for calculating results quickly under a more sophisticated system such as STV, this can be done while maintaining original paper copies of ballots for verification and auditing as needed.
5. Local representation: The proportional systems discussed here maintain a direct link between Members of Parliament and geographic localities. While it is true that these localities would likely be larger than they are today, and that voters may have more than one representative,

the result would be increased flexibility for constituents and an opportunity to access the Member of Parliament best suited to address their specific need (for example, the member best able to champion any given concern or issue, considering the member's own background or their party's policy position).

4. The case for a geographic hybrid (rural-urban) system

Canada is a diverse country with some parts of the population widely dispersed and others tightly clustered in urban centres: directly adopting an electoral system that works well in a country with a different population distribution is unlikely to produce a satisfactory outcome. Instead, we require a tailor-made solution that adapts the best elements of existing systems to Canada's unique context.

Jean-Pierre Kingsley and Fair Vote Canada (FVC) have each raised the possibility of a geographic "hybrid" voting system that elects representatives in the way that is most appropriate for the population density of the region they represent. Representatives for dense urban areas could be elected in multi-member districts, ensuring a high degree of proportionality, while representatives for rural areas could be elected in more traditional single-member districts. FVC's approach, Rural-Urban PR, would ensure voter equality in these single member districts by adding regional compensatory top-up seats, much like MMP. Since these would only be required outside of urban centres, the impact of these regional seats on riding sizes (or the requirement for adding seats to the House of Commons) would be reduced relative to nationwide MMP and greatly reduced relative to nationwide STV. FVC's submission to the committee contains a thorough explanation and assessment of this approach, and I highly recommend that the committee consider it in detail.

5. "A referendum if necessary, but not necessarily a referendum"

It has been suggested that to change the country's voting system without first holding a referendum on the subject would be fundamentally undemocratic. I would not disagree with this assertion, but would also suggest that to simply ask the electorate to choose between a simple, established, and well understood system and one or more strange new and different systems of generally greater complexity may not lead to an exercise in fruitful deliberation and informed decision making. If a new system could be proposed that achieved multi-partisan support, using that system for a fixed number of elections would provide voters with a much better understanding of the implications of a permanent switch. The third "trial" election (for example) under the new system could be held simultaneously with a simple referendum determining whether to adopt the system permanently or revert to FPTP.

In the event a pre-change referendum were to take place, it would need to be accompanied by an extensive public education campaign and strictly-enforced third-party spending and advertising regulations to prevent undue influence and potential misinformation spread by partisan or other special-interest groups. For new systems to stand on equal footing with FPTP, any alternative presented on the ballot would need to be fully concrete, with a detailed implementation plan leaving no uncertainty as to what exactly a voter is choosing. Finally, if choosing between more than one option, the ballot should be structured so as to collect sufficient information to generate a result that satisfies the greatest number of voters possible. Since the aim of the vote would be to select a single nationwide winner, AV would be an appropriate choice here.

Once again, thank you for your careful study and consultation on this issue. It is no understatement to say that the work of this Committee and the recommendations it puts forth may have a direct and significant impact the long-term future of our country. Your legacy can be to reject the injustices of our current electoral system and recommend an alternative that honours the spirit of Canadian democracy by treating all voters as truly equal. I would urge you strongly to do just that.

Respectfully yours,

Gord Stephen