



October 7, 2016

Special Committee on Electoral Reform
Committees and Legislative Services Directorate
House of Commons
131 Queen Street
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

RE: Submission of the International, Political and Policy Studies Student Association – Public Administration Committee Consultations on Electoral Reform

To the Special Committee on Electoral Reform,

As young Canadians, we would like to thank you for providing us with the opportunity to contribute to your study of alternative voting systems.

Attached, please find our submission/ brief on electoral reform to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform. On September 20th 2016, the International Political Policy Studies Students Association's Public Policy Committee at the University of Ottawa led a town hall on electoral reform for students to openly discuss their vision for the future of democracy in Canada. More than fifty students participated in the town hall discussions, and were eager to contribute to this timely and critical policy discussion.

We would like to acknowledge members of the Public Administration Committee: Jake An, Reilly Everitt-Cunningham, Ippocrates Papanikolaou, Beth Dodwell, Noah Busby, Enkhjin Enzo, Zorigtbaatar, Marcus Harrison, Hannah Wieler, Jenny Vouvalidis, Mahir Mohamed, Eleni Belete, Amen Ben Ahmouda, Brendan King, and Ahmed Al Jalili for their dedication and commitment to getting young people involved in this timely issue. We would also like to thank Professor Dr. Stephanie Mullen, Sara Bourdeau, Colin Poulin, William Hinse-MacCulloch, Diyyinah Jamora, Jillian LeBlanc, Laura Pennell and Maggie Buchanan. Their success of our submission is largely due to their hard work.

The youth of today are not only the future of tomorrow, but they are the leaders of today. By contributing to this consultation, we hope to illustrate that young people can make a difference – even if it's one word at a time.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Darren Touch". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a long, horizontal, slightly wavy line that serves as a decorative underline.

Darren Touch

Vice-President of Academic Affairs, Public Administration
Chair of the Public Administration Committee

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Neven Ahmad". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a long, horizontal, slightly wavy line that serves as a decorative underline.

Neven Ahmad

Director of Public
Vice-Chair of the Public Administration Committee

Introduction

Young people are not only the future of tomorrow, but they are the leaders of today. The voice of young people in Canada is a key indicator of the direction policy should follow. For this reason it is essential that youth be consulted and given an opportunity to provide their input on Canada's democracy.

On September 20th 2016, the International Political Policy Studies Students Association's Public Policy Committee at the University of Ottawa led a town hall on electoral reform for students to openly discuss their vision for the future of democracy in Canada. This report is an overview of the conversation, which took place and is an insight into young people's opinions on changing our electoral system. More than fifty students participated in the town hall discussions, and were eager to contribute to this timely and critical policy discussion. Mark Holland, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Democratic Institutions, provided opening remarks on the importance of the town hall, and the impact it will have.

The student discussion was organized into three distinct sections to obtain the participants thoughts on a variety of issues concerning democratic institutions. In the first section, the participants were asked a series of general questions regarding elections and electoral reform. The second section was focused on a range of topics regarding democratic principles and values. Finally, for the last section of the discussion, participants engaged in topics on the Canadian federal electoral reforms.

It is important to note that there was no collective or unanimous agreement as to which electoral system would be ideal for Canada's liberal democracy. The format of the town hall and the questions were borrowed and modified from the guide provided by the Government of Canada on hosting electoral reform town hall. The following findings are the compilation of data gathered from the separate segments of discussion.

Section 1: Why Youth Engagement Matters

Canada's last federal election in 2015 witnessed one of the highest voter turnouts (68.5%) since the 1993 general elections (70.9%). This was attributed to the high turnout among youth as data collected by Elections Canada indicates an increase of approximately 17.7 per cent totaling up to 58.3 per cent in 2015.

During the 2015 federal election, the current government ran on a platform to change the existing electoral system. In the Minister of Democratic Institution's mandate letter, the Minister is expected to "bring forward a proposal to establish a special parliamentary committee to consult on electoral reform, including preferential ballots, proportional representation, mandatory voting, and online voting." As young Canadians, we see value in the Special Committee on Electoral Reform's consultation process on our electoral system, and hope that many others contribute to it.

Many organizations and individuals have testified in front of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform (EERE) to provide with their insights and experience. However, few organizations have testified on behalf of young people on the matters of electoral reform. Only a select few such as Samara, Institut du Nouveau Monde, and Civix have provided related insights; needless to say, the representatives were not youth themselves. For this reason, it is fundamental that the voices of young people are heard when considering any electoral reform in Canada as it does directly affect our future.

The Public Administration Committee of the International Political Policy Studies Students Association wishes to change that. With the submission of this brief, we hope to hold an impact on the policy discussion surrounding electoral reform.

Section 2: Emerging Themes and Trends

Representation

About half of the participants said that they valued having a local representative because it enhanced the principle of democracy. This was expressed on the basis that it keeps the parties and governments in check by having an elected official represent a specific constituency as well as their affiliated party. However, participants noted Members of Parliament often fail to represent their constituency when faced with the party's stance on issues, which may be contrary to the interest of the constituency. There was a consensus that party discipline is strong, and that this was problematic to our liberal democracy.

Participants noted there is a lack of representation of minorities in the House of Commons. The underrepresentation of minorities including aboriginals, ethnic minorities, women, and immigrants is problematic, and many participants stressed that these groups represent important insights and perspectives. These groups often lack the extensive resources and support required to get involved and run a campaign. Furthermore, participants also highlighted that a diversity in skills, competence, and temperaments is important in the composition of the House of Commons.

It was also said that representation of youth is not sufficient within the House of Commons. As such, the issues presented and debated in the House are often unreflective of young people, and as such, contributes to the disenfranchisement of young people in the political process. Participants felt that parliamentarians often focus on issues pertaining to adults and senior members of the Canadian populations.

The data from Elections Canada shows that the most significant increase over 2011 was among Canadian women between the ages of 18 and 24. Turnout among this demographic jumped to 60.5 per cent from 40.9 per cent, an increase of 19.6 points. This data from Elections Canada, along with the points given by participants, strongly points to the disapproval from youths against the underrepresentation of women in politics. Overall, participants stressed the importance in having the House of Commons to be reflective of Canada.

An issue of underrepresentation of political parties also emerged; some participants felt that minor parties such as the Green Party of Canada and other smaller parties were also victims of underrepresentation under first-past-the-post (FTPT).

Turnout

Although the 2015 federal election may have seen a record number on voter turnout, participants agreed that minorities still suffer from under-representation especially among aboriginal communities. Participants believed the major cause of this phenomenon was the lack of education and awareness regarding the voting process. It was mentioned that low-income individuals often could not cast their ballot because of their inflexible work schedules and lack of access to transportation. As a solution, participants showed enthusiastic support for electronic voting. Only minor numbers were against it. The justification for this outcome was that it would help with the low voter turnout. It was argued that it would enable more eligible voters to participate in voting, especially for those who have disabilities and/or mobility challenges.

The question of mandatory voting was also a recurring topic throughout the entirety of the discussion, and caused much controversy. Some participants suggested that it was a good idea stating that it is a civic duty and an important responsibility as a citizen to vote. It was added that if mandatory voting were to happen in Canada, there would have to be a statutory holiday that would allow for paid leave

for voting employees. The argument for pro mandatory voting was under a program that would reward voters with incentives or punishments to those that do not. Some participants suggested the idea of having a tax credit as an incentive to encourage active participation in the political system. The argument against mandatory voting was under the assumption that it would be undemocratic. The overall argument over mandatory voting ultimately came down to virtues, norms, ethics, and the integrity of our liberal democracy.

Participants noted that Elections Canada should be given greater tools and resources to allow them to encourage Canadians to vote. They should be highly active on social media, and launch major campaigns to inform Canadians about voting and their polling stations.

Education

To tackle this issue of engagement and youth voter turnout, a large majority of participants agreed that change to the civics education system is necessary to improve the health of Canadian democracy. To solve this issue, some participants recommended greater collaboration and cooperation between the federal government and provincial governments in the engagement of youth in the political process (i.e. voting) by making civics classes mandatory for students. The consensus emerged that “civics courses” should be incorporated as a mandatory curriculum and should be encouraged by educators.

Alternative Electoral Systems

It is important to acknowledge that with a diversity of young voices at this town hall, there was no consensus on any electoral system. There were many electoral systems that was mentioned during our discussion on alternative electoral systems, including commentary on the current electoral system, first-past-the-post (FPTP). However, the most popular electoral system was the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP). The reasons for its favoritism comes from its success in other existing democracies such as Germany which has half proportional and half geographical representation. The participants mostly agreed that this mixed representation was a healthy balance of both accurately representing the populations and advocating for regional differences. Some participants argued that having every vote count was important in generating greater voter turnout as it would allow people to have confidence that their vote mattered.

Proponents of FPTP noted that the current system was easy for voters to understand, created strong majorities, and provided for a clear distinction between the winner and losers. Participants in favour of FPTP also noted that with other electoral system that produced more minorities, political parties may be less transparent in their agreement(s) when seeking to form Government. Some of the participants noted that the current system was less fair because it often does not corresponds to the national popular vote.

Participants recognized that there is no perfect electoral system. There are advantages and disadvantages to each system depending on one’s value. Participants agreed that a change in the electoral system will have major ramification as it is interconnected with our political system.

Party Politics

Another issue that came to light during the discussions were party politics and partisanship. Many participants felt that that political parties held too much power in the actions and decisions of elected Members of Parliament, therefore lessens local representation. Some even suggested to abolish the position of party whips to give more independence to individual parliamentarians, and/or restrict party discipline. Others that disagreed argued that abolishing all party discipline would create political

gridlocks and hinder legislations from passing. However, there was a consensus that party politics plays a major role in our liberal democracy often to the disadvantage of young people due to the focus by political parties on getting elected.

Section 3: Implications

Based on the information collected through the town hall, we have concluded the following:

- Youths want more representation and inclusivity, resources and access to politics for minorities to be represented within the House of Commons.
- There was no clear consensus to a perfect electoral system.
- Reforming the educational curriculum to include mandatory civics classes through provincial and federal cooperation and collaboration.
- Reducing partisan politics to allow Members of Parliament to better represent their constituencies.
- Providing greater support to voters who face disabilities and/or mobility challenges.
- Explore electronic voting to allow greater voter participation.