

I thank the members of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform for the opportunity to present my views.

SUMMARY

Guiding principles and values determine the best voting system. Based on these, I propose that the preferable system is the Alternative or Ranked Vote, closely followed by the Single Transferable Vote.

DETAILS

On 07 June 2016 this Special Committee was established with the following guiding principles as part of its mandate:

- Effectiveness and legitimacy: that the proposed measure would increase public confidence among Canadians that their democratic will, as expressed by their votes, will be fairly translated and that the proposed measure reduces distortion and strengthens the link between voter intention and the election of representatives;
- Engagement: that the proposed measure would encourage voting and participation in the democratic process, foster greater civility and collaboration in politics, enhance social cohesion and offer opportunities for inclusion of underrepresented groups in the political process;
- Accessibility and inclusiveness: that the proposed measure would avoid undue complexity in the voting process, while respecting the other principles, and that it would support access by all eligible voters regardless of physical or social condition;
- Integrity: that the proposed measure can be implemented while safeguarding public trust in the election process, by ensuring reliable and verifiable results obtained through an effective and objective process that is secure and preserves vote secrecy for individual Canadians;
- Local representation: that the proposed measure would ensure accountability and recognize the value that Canadians attach to community, to Members of Parliament understanding local conditions and advancing local needs at the national level, and to having access to Members of Parliament to facilitate resolution of their concerns and participation in the democratic process;

On 17 July 2016 Dan Ruimy and Mark Holland moderated a townhall concerning electoral reform in Dan's constituency of Pitt Meadows-Maple Ridge. A highlight of this townhall was a general overview of the different types of voting systems presented by Dr. Eline de Rooij, an assistant professor in Political Science at Simon Fraser University. What I deemed most notable about this presentation was Dr. Rooij's refusal to identify any voting system as "better" than the others. Instead, she firmly stated that the optimal voting system varies *according to the primary values of the organization or community for whom the voting system is intended*.

Some of the values attributable to Canadian society are incorporated into the guiding principles identified above, but identifying specific voter priorities is also key to establishing which voting methodology is likely to best serve all Canadians nationwide. For any priority to be considered a “value”, it should have the support of either a majority or an extremely strong minority (no less than 45% – a 5% variance from a majority) of Canadians surveyed. Thankfully, some information regarding voter priorities is readily available. In the December 2015 report “Canadian Electoral Reform: Public Opinion on Possible Alternatives” prepared by Abacus Data for the Broadbent Institute, a representative selection of Canadians were provided a list of potential goals for a voting system and asked to identify the 5 goals they considered most important. Of these, the following three goals achieved a level of support meeting the definition of “value” previously outlined:

- The ballot is simple and easy to understand – supported by 55% of respondents
- The system produces strong and stable governments – supported by 51% of respondents
- The system allows you to directly elect MP’s who represent your community – supported by 46% of respondents

This same report also assessed the appetite of Canadians for changes to their electoral system, as indicated by the following responses to the indicated questions:

- 1) Are changes needed to our system of voting?
 - ▶ 17% - system works well and does not to be changed
 - ▶ 41% - system only needs minor changes
 - ▶ 33% - system needs major changes
 - ▶ 9% - system needs to be changed completely

- 2) Do you personally think that the Liberal government should change Canada’s voting system, that it should keep the existing system, or you have no clear views on this?
 - ▶ 44% = should change
 - ▶ 24% = keep current system
 - ▶ 32% = no clear views

Based on these responses, it would seem that although there is some appetite for changes to our electoral system the majority of Canadians do not see the need for radical changes; however, it is somewhat less clear on what those changes should be. In this brief, I will focus on potential changes to the voting systems/methodologies.

The three voting methodologies promoted most frequently as potential successors to our current Single Member Plurality system (aka “first past the post”) are itemized below, with the arguments for and against their use. I thank the UK Electoral Reform Society (URL: <http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/>) for providing objective information on these and other electoral systems.

Mixed Member Proportional (MMP)

For:

- It is broadly proportional.
- Each voter has a directly accountable single constituency representative.
- Every voter has at least one effective vote.
- It allows a voter to express personal support for a candidate, without having to worry about going against their party.
- The representative lists created by the parties can foster greater representation of women, visible minorities, and indigenous people.

Against:

- Many representatives are accountable to the party leadership rather than the voters. (My personal term for this is “party hack” lists, as I consider it rife for abuse.)
- Having two different types of representative creates animosity between them. In Wales and Scotland, for example, people elected via the regional lists have been seen as having “got in via the backdoor” or as “assisted place” or “second class” members. This is not exactly conducive to fostering greater civility.
- MMP sometimes gives rise to “overhang” seats, where a party wins more seats via the constituency vote than it is entitled to according to their proportional vote. In Germany and New Zealand, but not in the UK, extra seats are allocated to the other parties to redress the balance. This can get complicated and lead to further bickering and animosity.
- It can be complicated, with people getting confused over exactly what they're supposed to do with their two votes.

Alternative Vote (aka Instant Run-off or Ranked Vote)

For

- All MPs would have the support of a majority of their voters.
- It retains the same constituencies, meaning no need to redraw boundaries, and no overt erosion of the constituency-MP link.
- It penalises extremist parties, who are unlikely to gain many second-preference votes.
- It encourages candidates to chase second- and third-preferences, which lessens the need for negative campaigning (one doesn't want to alienate the supporters of another candidate whose second preferences one wants) and rewards broad-church policies.
- It reduces the need for tactical voting. Electors can vote for their first-choice candidate without fear of wasting their vote.
- It reduces the number of “safe seats” where the election result is a foregone conclusion

Against

- A voting system that allows voters to rank candidates is prone to so-called 'Donkey voting', where voters vote for candidates in the order they appear on the ballot
- Under certain extreme electoral conditions, such as landslides, AV can produce a disproportional result
- In close three-way races the “compromise” candidate could be defeated in the first round even though they may be more broadly acceptable to the electorate than the top two candidates.

Single Transferable Vote (STV)

For

- STV gives voters more choice than any other system. This in turn puts most power in the hands of the voters, rather than the party heads, who under other systems can more easily determine who is elected. Under STV MPs' responsibilities lie more with the electorate than those above them in their party.
- Fewer votes are “wasted” (i.e. cast for losing candidates or unnecessarily cast for the winner) under STV. This means that most voters can identify a representative that they personally helped to elect. Such a link in turn increases a representative's accountability.
- With STV and multi-member constituencies, parties have a powerful electoral incentive to present a balanced team of candidates in order to maximise the number of higher preferences that would go to their sponsored candidates. This helps the advancement of women and ethnic-minority candidates, who are often overlooked in favour of a ‘safer’ looking candidate.
- STV offers voters a choice of representatives to approach with their concerns post-election, rather than just the one, who may not be at all sympathetic to a voter's views, or may even be the cause of the concern.
- Under STV, as opposed to hybrid systems such as MMP, all MPs are elected on the same basis, thus lessening the chances of there being animosity between them.
- There are no safe seats under STV, meaning candidates cannot be complacent and parties must campaign everywhere, and not just in marginal seats.
- When voters have the ability to rank candidates, there is no need for tactical voting and the most disliked candidate cannot win, as they are unlikely to pick up second-, third- and lower-preference votes.
- By encouraging candidates to seek first-, as well as lower-preference votes, the efficacy of negative campaigning is greatly diminished.

Against

- In sparsely populated areas, STV could lead to very large constituencies.
- The process of counting the results takes longer under STV, meaning that results cannot usually be declared on the same night as the vote took place. This can be combated with electronic ballot paper scanners.
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- A voting system that allows voters to rank candidates is prone to so-called “Donkey voting”, where voters vote for candidates in the order they appear on the ballot.
- Voters only tend to come into contact with candidates at election time, whereas people in the party know them much better. It could be argued, therefore, that a system that allows a political party to parachute its preferred candidates into safe seats is better than one that leaves the choice more in the hands of the voters.
- In large multi-member constituencies, ballot papers can get rather big and confusing.

Analysis of Voting Methodologies vis-à-vis Values

Effectiveness and legitimacy

All methodologies presented are generally considered to be legitimate processes; however, there is a concern regarding how the relative legitimacy of party nominees under the MMP system could be perceived and the subsequent fall-out in how they are treated by their peers.

Engagement

All methodologies would likely increase engagement as they would be seen as giving greater voice to the electorate than the current system.

Accessibility and inclusiveness (includes the value “Ballot is simple and easy to understand”)

All of these methodologies have ballots that are more complex than the current system. Their relative complexity, from lowest to highest, is

- Alternative Vote
- Single Transferable Vote
- Mixed Member Proportional

This could make voting more difficult for people with cognitive difficulties and/or other reading comprehension issues.

Integrity

The only concern in this area would have to do with the necessity for the use of computer ballots and the potential for hackers to hijack the results. However, since all voting systems are gradually trending towards computer balloting this it does not constitute a disqualifying attribute for any of them.

Local representation (includes the value “Directly elect MP’s to serve the community”)

Although all of the systems include direct voting for the MP’s (as the MMP allows for choosing an individual off of a party list), my own preference - shared by many Canadians - is to choose from people who have placed themselves directly to the electorate for consideration rather than being part of a “party hack” list where the party determines who goes on that list.

Incremental change instead of radical change

This is particularly important in light of the short time frame in which to institute any changes to the electoral system in time for the next election. The more extensive the changes to the system, the less likely they can be in place on schedule. The quickest and easiest methodology to put into place would be the Alternative Vote as there would be absolutely no changes required to the current constituency boundaries. Next in line would be the Single Transferable Vote, followed by the Mixed Member Proportional methodology.

Conclusion

Based on the values and principles identified above, I contend that at this time the optimal methodology to succeed our current Single Member Plurality system is the Alternative Vote, but that the Single Transferable Vote methodology also meets most of the criteria set forth.

Yours sincerely,

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