

The House of Commons Special Committee on Electoral Reform
In Support of Proportional Representation
Submitted by Laurel Ridd

Thank you to Justin Trudeau and the Liberal Party for promising to replace the First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral system by the next federal election in 2019.

The Liberal Party (and the citizens of Canada) have several concerns with respect to electoral reform, including:

Effectiveness and Legitimacy
Engagement

Some form of Proportional Representation (PR), either Open-list or the hybrid Mixed Member Proportional Representation would best address these concerns.

In the Government of Canada Electoral Reform National Dialogue information booklet, the guiding principle of Effectiveness and Legitimacy is further clarified as “[restoring] the effectiveness and legitimacy of voting, such as by reducing distortions and strengthening the link between voter intention and the electoral result.” Under a Proportional Representation system the proportion of votes for a particular party would exactly coincide with the proportion of seats allotted to that party, which would exactly coincide to the percentage of power wielded by that party in the House of Commons. This exact mirroring of the voting choices of citizens is unequalled by the other proposed voting systems (see points below); therefore PR does the best job of “...strengthening the link between voter intention and the electoral result.”

The guiding principle of Engagement is promoted when every citizen knows their first choice vote will be directly reflected in the distribution of both seats and power in the House of Commons. In addition, PR promotes collaboration between parties, so that less time would be spent post election on undoing the policies of the previous government.

Alternative Vote System

One of the proposed electoral systems to replace FPTP is the Alternative Vote system, yet there are some significant flaws in this ranked ballot system.

1) Citizens whose second choice candidate is a very distant second to their first choice candidate, and who live in a riding where their first choice candidate is unlikely to win, may choose to stay home on election day. They would not want their (distant) second choice vote to “support” a candidate (be used to give a candidate over 50% of the vote).

2) Citizens whose first and second choice candidates are both very unlikely to win may choose to stay home on election day.

Clearly the Alternative Vote system impedes both Legitimacy and Engagement. Significantly, in Winnipeg at neither the Voting Reform Consultation with Minister Maryam Monsef, nor at the Special Committee on Electoral Reform Consultation, nor at Liberal MP Robert-Falcon Ouellette’s town hall on electoral reform did even one individual speak in favour of the Alternative Vote system.

Single Transferable Vote System

Another proposed replacement for FPTP is the Single Transferable Vote system. Referring to this system, the Winnipeg Free Press noted: “Larger ridings with higher numbers of MPs elected tend to allow more candidates from smaller parties and independents the best chance to be elected because the threshold of votes is lower. Smaller ridings with fewer MPs elected tend to favour the larger parties.” Riding size should not be a determining factor in the likelihood of a win by any particular party; this would impede both Legitimacy and Engagement.

Referendum

At various points in this consultation process a referendum on electoral reform has been suggested. For the reasons below a referendum would be neither necessary nor desirable.

1) The Liberal Party made a clear promise that 2015 would be the last election under FPTP. Of the votes cast in the federal election of 2015, approximately 70% were for the Liberal Party and other parties that support a change in Canada’s voting system. The people of Canada have already spoken on this issue.

2) A referendum would be very costly.

3) The Special Committee on Electoral Reform was formed to intensively study the different voting systems, and to travel across Canada to consult with citizens. Some of the proposed voting systems, especially ranked ballot systems, can initially sound appealing until further study reveals their bias. Even maintaining the status quo of FPTP could appeal to citizens who either feel they have benefited from FPTP (at the expense of others), or who have different priorities in their lives at present and simply don’t have time to study the various electoral systems.

Conclusion

Some form of Proportional Representation, perhaps the hybrid Mixed Member Proportional Representation, would best fulfill the guiding principles of Legitimacy and Engagement. Some form of PR is used in Sweden, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, The Netherlands and Denmark, and gives an advantage to no party over any other. Canadians want a system where every first choice vote directly contributes to the make up of the House of Commons. On behalf of the 70% who voted in 2015 for electoral reform, thank you for considering these arguments.