

# Brief submitted to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform (2016/09/22)

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## **The Need for Electoral Reform**

Many voters are unaware of what's wrong with our current voting system and what's motivating Electoral Reform. Our current First-Past-the-Post voting system causes many problems, mainly arising from its most significant deficiency: that it does not treat voters equally and hence election results do not fairly reflect voter intent. This is also true of the preferential ballot Alternative Vote (AV) system.

## **Equal Rights but Unequal Treatment for Voters**

We vote because we aim to influence two election results, which in most democracies are kept separate:

1. Who our local representative is – a **local** contest
2. Which party forms the government – a **national** contest

Arguably most voters consider the second result more important than the first yet although all votes are allowed to be counted locally for the first result, for the second result roughly half the voters are denied any participation in the national contest simply because they didn't vote for the favourite in the local contest.

In single member ridings it is unavoidable that a large fraction of voters fail to get the local representative they preferred. There is, however, no rational justification for why those same voters (roughly 50% in recent elections) are denied having any influence on which party or parties win enough seats to form government. First-Past-the-Post adds insult to injury and arbitrarily uses their failure in their local riding contests as reason to demote them from participants into mere observers of their national election.

The vast majority of democracies around the world use proportional voting and don't have this problem.

Canadian voters deserve a voting system that allows them not only to elect local representatives but also to elect a Parliament of several hundred members that together fairly reflect the collective first preferences of **not just half but ALL voters**. There is no intrinsic reason why these objectives should be mutually exclusive.

The only countries that come close to achieving both objectives use Proportional Representation (PR) voting systems like STV (Single Transferable Vote) or MMP (Mixed Member Proportional). They ensure all voters cast votes that count, and that each party's share of the seats closely matches its share of the popular vote. 30% of the votes means close to 30% of the seats. PR systems treat voters equally and also ensure that political parties have a level playing field favouring no party over another.

All voters have a right to be full and equal participants in our federal elections and not be demoted to observer status. To achieve that requires replacing our current First Past the Post winner-take-all voting system with a "made in Canada" PR voting system. Achievement of Proportional Representation is the ultimate evidence that voters have been treated equally.

## **Referendum as a tactic to Derail Electoral Reform**

Our current voting system distorts voter intent and gives us many false majority governments that have 100% power but are not supported by a majority of voters. First-Past-the-Post is much better at giving governments the power to control their citizens than giving citizens the power to select and control their governments.

Many powerful political and corporate interests would like to see the status quo continue. They fear the uncertain impact of significantly changing the voting system. Evidence can be seen every day in misinformed and misleading anti-electoral reform articles in the media and in efforts to derail electoral reform by insisting on a hugely expensive public referendum prior to any change in the voting system.

Absent an extensive and lengthy public education campaign, we can expect that voters faced with a referendum about which they feel poorly informed will tend to stick with what they know, and vote for the familiar status quo. This is a result that would delight those who have a vested interest in continuing to exploit the unfair advantages they gain from our unequal First-Past-the-Post voting system. Furthermore history has demonstrated how easily referendum results can be manipulated to serve the interests of wealthy/powerful stakeholders with the aid of compliant main stream media.

A more fundamental objection to a referendum arises from the fact that the question “Should ALL voters have equal representation?” is a civil rights issue. We resolve such issues (e.g. “Should women or minorities have the right to vote?”) by doing the right thing, not by asking those who are unfairly advantaged for permission to restore equality to those who are disadvantaged.

## **Advancing the Guiding Principles for Federal Electoral Reform**

Replacement of our First Past the Post (FPTP) voting system by a “made in Canada” voting system that results in Proportional Representation would hugely advance the five guiding principles selected by the federal government as follows:

### **1. Restore the effectiveness and legitimacy of voting:**

Proportional Representation is convincing evidence of voter equality – it shows that every voter has equally impacted the distribution of seats in Parliament, that distortions have been largely eliminated and that there is a close match between election results and the intent of ALL voters as expressed in their votes. Under a Proportional Representation electoral system Majority government, as its name suggests, means a government elected by a majority of voters. None of this is true with First Past the Post or any other winner-take-all voting system such as Alternative Vote.

### **2. Encourage greater engagement and participation in the democratic process:**

a) Many citizens lack interest in federal politics because they feel their vote won't count and will be discarded. Under FPTP this perception is reality for 50% of voters. A PR voting system will

encourage citizen engagement and motivate voter turn-out by ensuring that nearly all votes contribute to the election of a candidate from the voter's **first preference** party.

b) FPTP encourages leading parties to forgo cooperation in favour of opportunities for competitive advantage and the frequently available reward of a false majority government which is supported by only a minority of voters. This gives rise to a hyper partisan adversarial culture in Parliament that is unappealing to many excellent potential candidates, esp. women. In contrast Proportional Representation requires that to win a majority of seats a party must win a majority of votes. Since this, as under First-Past-the-Post, is a rare occurrence, parties must learn to cooperate with other parties in order to achieve their policy goals. This fosters a civil and cooperative culture that encourages rather than dissuades aspiring candidates in pursuit of a seat in Parliament.

**3. Support accessibility and inclusiveness/avoiding undue complexity in voting:**

Our current exclusively single member ridings tend to favour the election of male candidates from the local ethnic majority. In most ridings that means white males. PR voting systems never exclusively rely on single member voting districts and usually allow voters to contribute to the election of more than one candidate. Experience in many countries has demonstrated that PR voting systems tend to elect a much more diverse set of candidates than winner-take-all systems like FPTP and are still simple to use in the ballot box. Even in cases where calculating the election results may be complex, the process of casting a vote is normally still simple.

**4. Safeguard the integrity of our voting process:**

PR voting systems give voters confidence that parties are constrained to win only the power that matches their level of voter support. When election results are close and/or controversial it is essential that a means be provided that allows an independent third party to confirm that the vote has been correctly calculated and has not been tampered with. Electronic voting raises concerns that there is no way to check and confirm the validity of results and that computer hacking presents an unquantifiable risk.

**5. Preserve the accountability of local representation:**

Under our current FPTP system many voters (often the majority) did not vote for the winning candidate in their riding and do not feel they have a local representative who will in any way represent their views or priorities. In PR voting systems of interest to Canada all but a few voters will have a local riding candidate and/or a regional candidate whom they helped elect with their first preference vote and hence whom they trust and can call to account.

## Summary of Recommendations

1. Our First Past the Post (FPTP) voting system should be replaced in time for the 2019 federal election by a “made in Canada” voting system that:
  - a. results in voter equality and Proportional Representation,
  - b. provides for election of local representatives,
  - c. provides a level playing field for election of political parties favouring no party over another,
  - d. avoids the use of “closed lists” of candidates whose order of priority for party list seats is determined by the party rather than by the number or share of votes the candidates individually received.
2. Provided that the government proposes to replace our current First Past the Post (FPTP) voting system with a voting system that results in voter equality and Proportional Representation, a public referendum prior to the adoption of the new system should be avoided for reasons described above.