

Electoral Reform Committee Submission

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(As An Individual)

Introduction

The Special Committee on Electoral Reform has been appointed to identify and conduct a study of viable alternate voting systems to replace the first-past-the-post system, as well as to examine mandatory voting and online voting.

The committee mandate includes five principles: effectiveness and legitimacy; engagement; accessibility and inclusiveness; integrity; and local representation. Those principles seem to have broad support, and certainly have my full support.

As a part of the study process the committee has already heard from many expert witnesses, and by now committee members are quite familiar with the mechanics of the main Canadian options, which are FPTP, AV, List PR, STV and MMP.

An assessment of those five electoral systems against each of the principles shows that each system scores well against some principles and not quite so well against others. In qualitative terms it is fair to say that none of the five electoral systems listed scores so poorly that it should obviously be dropped from further consideration, and it is also fair to say that none of the systems meets all five principles perfectly.

Therefore any decision to replace the current FPTP system with a different system will not be replacing a bad system with a perfect system. Instead it will be a decision to replace a good system with a better system. On that basis it is my submission that Canada should replace our FPTP system (a good system that has served Canada adequately) with an STV system (a system that will better serve Canada in the future).

I am not knowledgeable enough to comment on which particular version of STV would be best for Canada, other than to mention that leaving the largest 10 to 15 existing ridings untouched is a given. Beyond that combining 3 to 5 existing ridings into STV districts should be the norm, as well as perhaps allowing 20 other medium sized ridings to pair up into 10 two-member ridings.

The remainder of this submission is a response to just a few of the concerns that have been raised about an STV electoral system in Canada. I have no comment about either mandatory voting or electronic voting.

Large Districts

One of the challenges that MPs in Canada face is having a presence throughout their riding. For urban MPs this is not so difficult, but for a smaller number of rural and northern MPs this challenge can be quite significant. Any move to combine two or more current ridings into STV districts would seem to exacerbate this problem, as each MP elected into an STV district could reasonably be expected to provide a similar presence throughout the larger district.

However, a review of the existing 338 ridings shows that while the largest riding is about 2,000,000 square kilometers there are also 239 existing ridings that are less than 20,000 square kilometers in size (ie less than 1% the size of the current largest riding) and over 200 of those are smaller than 2000 square kilometers.

Many of those small ridings border each other and can be safely grouped without any measureable impact on the ability of STV MPs to serve their constituents. This is clearly the case in any major urban area, and could be extended to many rural areas in southern Canada. Limiting the size of an STV district to 200,000 square kilometers would only eliminate 12 ridings from the possibility of “amalgamation”.

The variability of STV district size (in terms of number of MPs instead of geographic size) has also been proposed as a weakness of STV. Ideally each STV district **would** elect the same number of MPs, just as ideally each FPTP riding **would** represent the same number of citizens.

The realities of our country make those goals impractical. We live with some inherent unfairness under FPTP and we would continue to live with essentially the same unfairness under STV.

Dislike of Lists

A complaint about PR systems in general, and particularly List PR is that the political parties can inherit a significant degree of control as it relates to “imposing” candidates on “unwilling” citizens.

While this criticism might be valid for List PR, it is not equally valid for all PR systems, and particularly not valid for STV. In fact the criticism is actually more valid as a condemnation of FPTP instead of STV. In our current FPTP system a small group of party officials get together in each constituency to “impose” a candidate for that party on the citizens of that riding.

Somewhat different groupings of party officials are involved in a List PR system compared to FPTP, but party officials none the less. The average voter has no more ability to reject the party choice in an FPTP election than in a List PR election.

In contrast in STV almost all citizens would have more choice: the flexibility to select both party and person. This important feature of STV seems to be under appreciated.

Other Criticisms of STV

In addition to the two specific criticisms discussed above there are a range of other criticisms, such as:

- only FPTP can decisively replace unpopular governments,
- only FPTP leads to broad, national political parties, and
- only FPTP avoids instability.

Each of those claims has been addressed by many of your witnesses and by a number of other Canadians who have also submitted briefs to your committee. In the interests of brevity I defer to those other contributions.

Referendum

There are calls for a referendum. Those calls are mostly based on the idea that only a referendum can grant the moral authority to change our electoral system. But would proceeding without a referendum be immoral? Certainly a change might be considered immoral if it arbitrarily removed the right to vote from a specific group of Canadians or if the change put a group of citizens at severe disadvantage with respect to effectively participating in our democracy. Changing from FPTP to STV does not meet that threshold.

Further, presumably the ultimate purpose of a referendum is to consult with Canadians. In my view the consultations that the committee is undertaking are superior to a referendum because they give the committee members the opportunity to engage in a discussion so that they fully understand the concerns of Canadians. A referendum, while admittedly involving many more Canadians, simply cannot provide that type of knowledge to Parliament. In this situation the quality of information is more important than the quantity.

If the committee does decide that a referendum is necessary, it should be held after 10 years or 3 elections under STV – at that time citizens will have equivalent experience with both FPTP and STV and will be able to make a high quality decision as to the merits of both systems.

Summary/Recommendations

The committee has completed excellent work so far as it relates to identifying a list of electoral systems to choose from as well as a list of criteria that should be used to select the best electoral system for Canada.

Canadians have concerns about each of these alternate systems, but careful examination of the concerns by committee members will show that those concerns are not so significant to merit retaining the status quo.

This is the right time to move from a good electoral system (FPTP) to a better electoral system, and that better system is STV.