

Submission to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

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Summary

Canada is currently facing an electoral crisis caused by declining turnout and widespread disillusionment. Since Parliament created the Special Committee on Electoral Reform, the issue has become a topic of national discussion and debate. My recommendations include changing how we vote to a mixed-member proportional system, lowering the voting age, and reaching out to marginalized Canadians in order to engage in a fully consultative process. I am also strongly opposed to a referendum on the issue of different voting systems, believing that the government's careful consideration should lead Canadians regarding this fundamental issue.

Introduction

One of the central aspects of modern Canada is the strength of its democracy—our ability to have fundamental control over our affairs, lives, and country. However, as voter turnout declines, parliamentary dysfunction remains an issue, and our elections seem less representative, the electoral process in Canada has come into question as an agent of democracy. Ideally, elections should be effective, legitimate, representative, inclusive, and essentially fair. As the debate surrounding electoral reform unfolds, a historic opportunity to improve our democracy has emerged. While first past the post (FPTP) may have worked for a newly-formed dominion in 1867 and when there were only two major parties, it cannot represent the diverse opinions and values of Canada in 2016. We must replace FPTP with another process that will make Canada a stronger democracy for generations to come.

Issues with First Past the Post

One thing which I believe to be indisputable is that our elections in their present form are deeply flawed. The numerous areas in which Canadian elections are underperforming will be discussed for the Committee to consider.

First, voter turnout has reduced dramatically under FPTP. Many Canadians are disillusioned—believing their votes are wasted or do not matter—and as a result, federal voter turnout has not been above 70% in over twenty years (Ferrerias, 2015). This troubling trend is especially pronounced among voters under 30, only 41% of whom voted in the 2011 federal election (Elections Canada, n.d.). However, the indifference of Canadians is something I believe to be a symptom—rather than a cause—of Canada’s democratic woes. If Canadians are convinced their votes matter in a fair and legitimate process, turnout will increase. Consequently, I believe finding an electoral system that makes every vote count is of the utmost national importance.

Another problem with FPTP is the fundamentally undemocratic concept of strategic voting. A significant number of Canadians are abandoning their ideals at the ballot box and are instead voting for their second (or even third) choices out of fear that another, even less desirable candidate will be elected (Wherry, 2015). Thus, even if votes are fairly translated, the true views of Canadians are not being adequately represented. An ideal electoral system would allow for a diverse range of political opinions and eliminate voting out of fear.

FPTP also produces false majorities—governments which have virtually all of the power in the House of Commons without support from the majority of Canadians. In the last 50 years, Canada has had 20 federal elections, 11 of which resulted in the formation of majority

governments. However, only two of these governments were actually elected with the majority of votes. Although federal elections are really just multiple votes held in constituencies across the country, we often see elections as a chance for all Canadians' voices to be heard in choosing a government. By isolating elections to local races, FPTP skews how larger national trends affect government. Accordingly, a modern electoral system should elect governments based on widespread support, thus leading to governments in which parties work together to make Canada a better democracy and country for all of its citizens.

Changing Our System

Factoring in the problems our country faces with its current system and Canada's unique needs, the best system for Canadian elections is some form mixed-member proportional representation (MMP), similar to the systems used in Germany or New Zealand. This system is simple and combines effective local representation with fair and legitimate proportional representation. Implementing MMP allows our government to keep the tradition of local representation in Parliament while remedying the disproportionality that occurs in our current elections.

My recommendation of MMP relates to all of the principles for electoral reform and I believe it to be the best way to improve the future of Canadian democracy:

- MMP will ensure our elections are effective and legitimate by guaranteeing that Canadians whose votes do not count towards the election of their local MP will have their voices heard in the proportional House of Commons.
- A MMP system is more engaging and trustworthy for Canadians because it will ensure a fair translations of votes to seats in the House of Commons. Thus, by reducing the number of

false majorities, parties will need to form coalitions or partnerships in order to work for Canadians. These partnerships will in turn cause government to reflect a wider range of views and be more representative of all Canadians. Contrary to the popular belief that minority governments are inefficient, coalitions have worked in other countries using proportional representation, and even minority governments in Canada have been able to accomplish lasting progress, such as our current flag and health care system.

- Proportional representation is proven to reflect a wider range of demographics, and it ensures the representation of minority groups in elected legislatures. It can be concluded that Canada's House of Commons elected under MMP will have more immigrants, low-income Canadians, women, and Indigenous Canadians, all of whom will bring a unique perspective and experience to governing (Smith, 2016).
- Local representation will be preserved through constituency representatives. Every Canadian will still have a local member to represent them in the House of Commons.
- Finally, one of the greatest advantages of MMP compared to its alternatives is that it will not complicate the election process more than necessary, especially for everyday Canadians. Updating our electoral system will be a matter of adding a party vote to the well-known local ballot. Mixed-member systems are therefore no less accessible and understandable than FPTP to most voters.

Over the years, first past the post has served Canada well. Now, however, it simply cannot accurately represent the political needs of Canadians. We currently have a chance to improve our democracy for all current and future Canadians. By implementing mixed-member

proportional representation, Parliament can demonstrate Canada's commitment to having modern and representative elections.

Consulting with Canadians

As electoral reform—something about which I am very passionate—has become a national issue in Canada, I have paid close attention to the discussion. I am 17 years old, and though young Canadians like me are currently not eligible to vote, I firmly believe we should be included as an essential part of the conversation. It is, after all, the future of our elections which is being decided. It is important to keep in mind that not only youth but the most marginalized segments of our communities such as the impoverished, immigrants, and Indigenous Canadians are also affected by the decisions Parliament makes on a daily basis. Therefore, I urge the Committee to consider how its recommendations will impact those who cannot vote and those who are being left out of the conversation.

Another issue that has come up is whether or not Canadians should get a chance to vote directly on electoral reform through a referendum. I believe that in cases such as this, the government should take the lead. Referendums have immense problems such as the lack of compromise and polarization of issues, not to mention that the very wording of the question can drastically change the outcome. Furthermore, a referendum means today's electorate decides on the system that will last for decades or longer. For something as crucial to our national identity as democracy, Canadians should be consulted through a meaningful and thorough national discussion which takes into account the needs and concerns of all Canadians. In the case of electoral reform, a referendum would polarize the issue and possibly exacerbate the issues we currently face in our democracy.

The Role of Youth

One of the most disconcerting aspects of the state of our democracy is the abysmal turnout of those under 30 years old. There are countless hypotheses to explain this phenomenon, such as immaturity or ignorance, but the truth is that youth are *not* all apathetic about politics or democracy, and it is a mischaracterization to label them as such. In fact, a study conducted by Samara indicates that young people consistently perform political acts beyond voting (such as protesting, petitioning, or volunteering) at a higher rate than the older demographic (Samara, 2015). Therefore, it seems to me that the current electoral system has left youth searching for other ways to participate so that their voices are heard and considered.

To me, youth voter turnout is an issue that should not be met with condescension and ageist stereotypes, but instead with hope and optimism. People are more likely to vote if they start early (Samara, 2015), and thus I support reducing the voting age to 16. Canadian youths are affected by government decisions on a daily basis and overall have the same capacity as adults to comprehend the significance and influence of their votes. Allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to participate in elections would be a vote of confidence in today's youth and encourage many to vote for the first time. Moreover, allowing students to vote while they are still part of the public education system opens up new doors of opportunity for civic education in which youth can participate in the democratic process rather than simply learning about it. By lowering the voting age, Parliament would show youth the importance of voting—and we will rise to the task.

Conclusion

While first past the post has kept Canada safe and stable for 150 years, it is time to replace the system that has become skewed and unfair. If we implement mixed-member

proportional representation, Parliament will be more diverse, inclusive, cooperative, and representative. Moreover, Canadians will have a renewed sense of confidence in our elections and their results. We should extend this renewed confidence to all Canadians by reaching out to our most marginalized groups and Canadian youth to make our electoral process more inclusive for all Canadians. While this national discussion is occurring, we also have a chance to examine the role of youth in our democracy. Parliament should take the necessary steps to show youth they are a respected part of Canadian society and its democratic process. By lowering the voting age, we can make democracy more accessible to all Canadians and transform many of our youth into lifelong voters and engaged citizens.

Now is a time for Canadians to come together in deciding what our values are for an electoral system. What do we want our nation's future governments to look like? What is most important in improving our democracy? Do we want to be united in our efforts to make Canada better, or will we allow ourselves to be divided by conflict over the best path forward? Mixed-member proportional representation will uphold the Canadian values of inclusion, legitimacy, and integrity and keep our democracy strong as we move forward into what can be our country's best years.

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