Submission to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

#ERRE Community Dialogue

Hosted in Edmonton-Centre

Submitted by Mo Bot, RPP, MCIP

Summary Highlights from the Dialogue

- Our Canadian electoral system produces disproportionate results that do not accurately reflect the nuance of voter intention.
- These results lead to voter disengagement and reduced participation in our democratic institution.
- Improving the effectiveness and legitimacy of our voting system is important for rebalancing democratic fairness, ensuring all votes count, and increasing voter participation.
- There is strong support for adoption of a form of Proportional Representation that ensures every vote counts equally in contributing to the makeup of our elected parliament.
- There are strong concerns about security and privacy related to adoption of electronic and/or online voting technologies.
- A referendum is not recommended at this time. Majority support in parliament for the change should be enough. We elect our MPs to represent us and use their judgement on complex issues. This is exactly the type of decision we expect them to become informed about and act on intelligently.
- Any change implemented could be set up for regular legislated reviews of the process to ensure that the system implemented is working. Elections Canada makes tweaks to our electoral process all the time and this should be no different.

Context

5 people joined the host for the conversation on August 17, 2016 at a private residence in the federal riding of Edmonton-Centre. Attendees ranged in age from 30-39. All are interested in improving our democracy but had limited understanding of the electoral reform conversation, issues, and opportunities that have been identified to-date. This was an avenue for them to learn more about the issue and have their perspectives shared as a contribution to the process.

We met for over 3 hours to talk about a broad range of topics through a facilitated conversation. The dialogue approach involved a mix of personal reflection and sharing, group dialogue, and watching some online resources about different voting systems and discussing the information.

General

We began our dialogue by each person thinking about why they or others they know may or may not vote in elections. Everyone wrote out their thoughts on individual pieces of paper and then the ides both for/against voting were lumped together in categories of common themes that we named as follows.

Reasons people usually vote:

- Social Pressure
    - People feeling pressured to vote out of fear that "so-and-so" will win
- It Works
    - People genuinely feel that our democracy works and want to participate in the democratic process through voting in elections
- Loyalty
    - Believe in the party, the candidate, the tradition and will continue to participate
- Demographics
    - Some groups may be more likely to vote than others (age/social status/economic status/etc)

Reasons people do not usually vote:

- Voting Accessibility
    - It may be difficult to access polling stations or obtain time off work
    - Misinformation or understanding about voting requirements
- Disengagement
    - Don't understand the issues
    - Apathetic and feel that their vote doesn't count
    - Wonder if the system is even legitimate, assumptions everything is corrupt
- Lack of Information
    - Don't have time to follow the issues
    - Lack of education of issues and/or voting process
- Rejection of the Status Quo
    - Refusal to participate in the system
    - May vote only to spoil the ballot
- Demographics
    - Some groups may be less likely to vote than others (age/social status/economic status/etc)

Democratic Principles and Values

Each attendee took a moment to reflect on the guiding principles of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform and provide their own ranking from 1-5 (one being least important, five being most) for each. We then had a discussion about how each person ranked them and came up with a collective ranking. Generally speaking, there was not much variation between how each person ranked the principles individually.

Our ranking came out as the following, although all principles were considered to have an important place within the electoral reform conversation.

1. Effectiveness & Legitimacy
2. Engagement
3. Accessibility & Inclusiveness
4. Integrity

5. Local Representation

Some of the reasons for ranking Effectiveness & Legitimacy first include:

- The current system does not treat all votes as equal
- Voter intention is not reflected in the makeup of our elected parliament
- A minority of voters can construct a parliamentary majority
- The current voting system exacerbates differences between regions that do not accurately reflect the nuance of voter intention
  - This was also a reason for placing Local Representation last on the list as the tensions between regions is seen by many as detrimental to our democracy, whether during elections or during parliamentary sessions.

There were no principles identified that were not covered off by this list.

Canadian Federal Electoral Reforms

We engaged in an open group dialogue on a wide range of topics under this section.

First we discussed electronic voting.

- General consensus is this is an idea whose time has not yet come
  - No system exists yet that cannot be hacked and there is not a lot of confidence in the government's handling of electronic systems due to the Phoenix pay scandal
  - No way to check if something did change behind the scenes within the technology
  - Nothing comes close to being as secure as pencil/paper
  - Do not remove the involvement of human eyes and monitoring - don't let the computer make a determination about what vote counts (currently all parties participate in vote checking)
- If there was a way to personalize every vote - but it is hard to do that and preserve people's right to privacy within the voting process

Next we discussed online voting.

- Still requires voters to have access to a computer so not necessarily more accessible to all segments of the population
- Concerns about use of a mechanism that involves a passcode that could become compromised
- Concerns anonymity and right to privacy could be compromised if a number was attached to individual vote
- No system exists yet that cannot be hacked
- There could be a place for online voting to accommodate out-of-country voting or for other special need groups identified

Next we discussed mandatory voting.
- Don't like the government making people do anything, really
- It can be a completely legitimate political decision to NOT participate on the voting process
  - If someone may feel that action most accurately captures their political position then they should be allowed to exercise their right that way
- If people are forced to vote, are we inviting uneducated votes?

- - ○ Will they pay attention to who they are voting for?
  - ○ Will they always vote for the party that was against mandatory voting?
  - ○ Is democracy really improved if people are forced to vote but may not be engaged on the issue?
- ● Would need to address the accessibility issues that currently exist around voting for this to even be considered
  - ○ Need to improve education and outreach so people understand the system and feel empowered to participate

To end this portion of the conversation, we watched several videos on different voting systems that are being discussed as part of the #ERRE process and then hand an open conversation about the pros and cons of each as compared to the current First-Past-The-Post system.

- ● Single Transferable Vote (STV)
  - ○ This system made the most sense and was a loose preference of the whole group
  - ○ Prefer that all candidates face the voters and there is no use of closed party lists
  - ○ General feeling that multi-member ridings in STV would provide more accurate representation based on voter intention locally and regionally
  - ○ Need to ensure the ballot is easy to read
- ● Mixed Member Proportional (MMP)
  - ○ Good as long as ballot design must be easy to read
  - ○ There is opposition to closed party lists for selecting top up seats

There is general agreement that any form of proportional representation would be a strong improvement over the existing system and that whatever form is chosen needs to maintain a strong connection to local voters.

Additional Feedback

We also discussed the need for a referendum.

- ● All agree there is a need for strong engagement that reaches as many Canadians as possible. All MPs should be hosting dialogues on this issue, regardless of political leanings, and should be providing accurate information to the public about the topic and experiences in other places.
- ● Concerns a referendum on this topic is too binary to address the complexity of the issue. Is the referendum on whether we need a change at all? Or what specific voting system will be adopted? There is not enough time to properly engage and provide information to voters for a referendum while also changing the voting system for 2019.
- ● If having a voice in our democracy is considered to be a fundamental human right, then we should not be relying on a referendum to determine how the rights of citizens must be protected.
- ● Some attendees felt that majority support in parliament for the change should be enough. We elect our MPs to represent us and use their judgement on complex issues. This is exactly the type of decision we expect them to become informed about and act on intelligently.
- ● Any change implemented could be set up for regular legislated reviews of the process to ensure that the system implemented is working. Elections Canada makes tweaks to our electoral process all the time and this should be no different.

Thank you for considering our comments in this process.