

Submission on behalf of Be the Vote to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

***Be the Vote** is a non-partisan, youth-led volunteer organization that aims to increase voter turnout among young Canadians. The information in this brief is grounded in our efforts conducting grassroots outreach, engaging directly with young non-voters and ambivalent voters, and in our online and televised advertising efforts.*

Recommendation 1: *Mandate Elections Canada to encourage voter participation*

Recommendation 2: *Designate Elections Canada or other appointed body to undertake a permanent role providing civic education, beyond elementary and secondary school systems*

The ERRE has outlined five principles for Canada's voting system: 1) effectiveness and legitimacy, 2) engagement, 3) accessibility, 4) integrity, and 5) local representation. Evaluation of proportional representation, online voting, and compulsory voting is to be done while considering the impact on these principles. There are, however, many electoral policy changes that likely require less deliberation, in furthering these five main principles.

Be the Vote has prepared this brief to further the principle of **engagement**, which was defined by the ERRE as, “[measures that] encourage voting and participation in the democratic process, foster greater civility and collaboration in politics, enhance social cohesion and offer opportunities for inclusion of underrepresented groups in the political process”. It is our opinion that encouraging participation in the voting system can be facilitated by stronger policy measures that directly promote engagement and education. This is in addition to voting system changes being assessed by the ERRE.

As members of the ERRE will agree, engaging the wider public beyond political pundits and party members in electoral reform is a difficult task. Engaging new voters in political process is also challenging. Beyond disillusionment with the FPTP voting system, we have come to understand that many Canadians lack basic knowledge about the voting system as it exists today. Elections Canada and researchers have studied this topic extensively and it is known that lack of interest, time or information, and changing or temporary residences, are all factors that impact the decision to vote.

Anecdotally, we find that many Canadians are not connected to politics in day-to-day life, unlike those writing, reading and contributing in other ways to this committee.

In 1989, the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (RCERPF) set out principles similar to the ERRE today. These included, “democracy is an ideal to be promoted”, and, “democracy is a matter of education” (Fortin 1991: 17). We know these principles are just as important and relevant as those proposed by the ERRE today. And, our team questions, from the experiences of our adolescence and adulthood, whether there has ever been a commitment to these principles by our government.

It is also important to recognize the extent to which system reform might impact the principles and goals of the ERRE. There is literature that finds institutional factors are not the cause of changes to voter participation. Gray and Craul (2000) find that electoral institutions matter in explaining differences among democracies, however they observe that institutions have remained fairly stable alongside the decline of voter participation in democratic industrialized nations, and find that declining modes of group mobilization (declining labour organization, absence of class cleavages, etc) and electorate demographic factors give a fuller explanation of turnout decline. There is no silver bullet, but we can make changes that aim to account for changing cultural and demographic factors in consideration of future voters, beyond the discontent among voters with representation in the system today.

While Be the Vote is concerned with youth voter participation, the same principles we are concerned with are applicable to other underrepresented groups identified by the ERRE. Youth are also “women, Indigenous Peoples, youth, seniors, Canadians with disabilities, new Canadians, and residents of rural and remote communities”.

Experience highlights during the 2015 federal election

In April and May of 2015, Be the Vote solicited the large majority of students’ unions and associations in an effort to share creative resources and campaign ideas for get-out-the-vote initiatives. While Be the Vote successfully partnered with Ryerson University and the University of Manitoba, it was evident that campaigning to increase voter turnout among student bodies was a low priority on many student governments’ agendas. In part, this was because the election fell at the beginning of the school year, just as welcome week and home opener activities were winding down. Another not-for-profit, Vote Savvy, was highly successful in engaging the University of Guelph, however, they had received administrative support from the university for many

activities. Our team felt that student governments, though well-placed to provide information to over one million students in Canada, have limited resources and short-sighted agendas, under one or two-year governing terms, which makes planning for federal or other elections an uncommon event.

The goal of sharing these stories is to illustrate that the communications process, intended to reach youth, student organizations, and other youth forums, are not synchronized or remarkably effective in delivering accessible information about voting. This is compounded by a lack of prominence of non-partisan information in the media and coverage on voter process, except for complaints from voters in line on voting day.

Do new voters or citizens know how to participate in the voting system?

Do new voters or citizens understand the current voting system?

How do we expect citizens to understand the voting system when we commit so few resources to civic education, except to those in the primary and secondary school system?

Should electoral bodies encourage voting?

There is little study on the topic of electoral bodies encouraging voter participation. Lewis (2015) analyzed the Fair Elections Act in regards to this topic, and observed widespread support for Elections Canada promoting awareness and education around the question of, “why vote”, as opposed to the basics on “how to vote”. It was also found that the limitations of Elections Canada’s awareness mandate are inconsistent with other Canadian electoral bodies, and that the budget spent on civic education is small (Lewis 2015, 306).

The effect of such a “soft” approach to civic engagement is that those who are politically engaged have come to be through having politically active families, personal interest in social issues, and social circles that are political. Civic engagement is left to a whim. This is not to negate the strong efforts and successes of notable groups including CIVIX, Samara, and Apathy is Boring. Instead, we strongly recommend that civic education and engagement is granted longevity and commitment by our government beyond the formal school system.

Advertising campaigns

A study of the 2011 Elections Canada advertising campaign found a positive influence on turnout among people with disabilities, Aboriginal peoples, and seniors, though there was no impact on youth (McGregor and Anderson 2014). The explanation by McGregor and Anderson was that there are education efforts used by Elections Canada in schools throughout the year, including the Student Vote (CIVIX) program, and that the impact of education or awareness might already be realized. As students ourselves, some who have been over the age of 18 for more than one election, we do not agree that this is a complete explanation for advertisements not affecting youth. We heard from participants at a youth conference in early 2015 that there needs to be quality, relevance, and intrigue in the advertising used by electoral bodies. And, that they pale in comparison to those of political parties, but also to the advertising world as a whole (music, fashion, cinema, events, etc).

The role of non-profit civic engagement

Organizational mandates that solely encourage voter participation are unfeasible under current electoral legislation and charitable legislation in Canada. Be the Vote's mandate is to encourage youth participation. Elections Canada was not able to enter into a contractual partnership during the 2015 federal election because of our explicit motive (albeit, non-partisan) to encourage voting. Organizations which were foremost concerned with providing information, however, were able to find support. Nonpartisan civic engagement that takes a proactive, encouraging approach is not permissible under charitable guidelines of Canada Revenue Agency, further hampering the efforts of any organization that encourages voting as their primary mandate.

Realistically, massive, national public engagement is required to reach Canadians and is resource intensive. Be the Vote is a very small organization, and its activities are not satisfactory for addressing the challenges we have identified.

Conclusion

Advanced democracies such as Canada with a fair level of security need advances in maintaining citizen engagement with the electoral system. Hyper-political citizens cannot be the only ones to engage. Leaving the onus on Elections Canada to engage

Canadians during an election period is an immense task. Electoral reform should assess ways in which encouragement and education can occur consistently.

References

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