

**Brief on Results of Youth Town Halls
Submission to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform**

Brief prepared by:

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About us: Leadnow is a non-profit, independent advocacy organization founded in 2011. We have a small staff team based in Toronto and Vancouver and many volunteers located in every province. We engage people across Canada online and offline on a variety of issues, and we want to build an open democracy, a fair economy, and a safe climate for all generations. We are also a member of the Every Voter Counts Alliance, a diverse set of groups calling for proportional representation for Canada.

We acknowledge that we've already submitted a brief to this committee but are hoping the committee will accept this second document, as it is the summary of submissions from youth across Canada and their opinions on democratic reform, intended to reach the ERRE. As we know the committee is interested in hearing from diverse groups of people, we're hopeful that these results will be useful in guiding your discussion.

Introduction

Leadnow is a non-profit, independent advocacy community made up of hundreds of thousands of people from across the country. About 75 000 of our members are under the age of 30.

When the voting reform process started, we felt strongly that it was important to hold special events for young people in order to create a space that would specifically address their concerns on democratic reform. Young people are historically less likely to participate in our electoral system, so we wanted to find out more about whether they feel that the current system is doing enough to represent them. We also believe that electoral reforms undertaken now will set the stage for the type of democracy that younger generations will interact with for years to come. Therefore, any discussion of how to change our voting system should rightly engage with and consider the opinions of youth.

What we did

We held four youth-centric town halls on voting reform between September 27th and October 4th 2016: one in Vancouver, one in Winnipeg, and two in Toronto. For the Vancouver event we partnered with the University of British Columbia Political Science Students Association and for the first of the Toronto events we partnered with the Ryerson University Student Union and the University of Toronto Student Union. These were among just a handful of town halls we are aware of where space was created specifically to hear from youth on their opinions about democratic reform.

What happened

Approximately 225 youth took part in a youth town hall between September 27th and October 4th, 2016 - 75 in Vancouver, 50 in Winnipeg, 100 in Toronto. Attendees were between the ages of 16 and 35 and had a range of prior knowledge on the issues. Some of them were deeply interested in voting reform whereas others came just to learn more.

The structure of the event was similar in each location. The participants sat in groups of 6-8 people with facilitators from Leadnow and our partner organizations. We did a brief presentation on five different types of voting systems: first-past-the-post, alternative vote, mixed-member proportional, single transferable vote, and rural-urban proportional, and followed that with a brief Q&A section. Then we gave youth the opportunity to discuss several questions in their groups:

- What brought them out to the event?
- Do they feel the system represents them effectively? Why or why not?
- What improvements could be made to our voting system?
- What values are important in a voting system?
- In Vancouver and Toronto we asked what the youth thought about lowering the voting age to 16

What we heard

Frustration with First-Past-the-Post (FPTP)

86% of participants in Vancouver, 93% of participants in Winnipeg, and 88% of participants in Toronto reported that they felt that the current system does not represent youth well.¹ The youth said that the problem of underrepresentation is something that impacts many people across Canada, not just youth, but that FPTP could impact youth in particular by acting as a disincentive to getting engaged in voting and could increase apathy towards the process. Many participants also reported feeling that politicians do not take the time and energy to engage with them or direct platform promises at youth.

Here are some more things that participants said about why they feel the current voting system is not working:

- **It leads to wasted votes.** Many of the participants reported feeling unrepresented in the House of Commons and discouraged by the feeling that the system is unfair.
- **It leads to strategic voting** that is negative in nature - where people vote against someone they don't like rather than for the person they like most. Many youth who were older and had voted before reported having personally voted strategically in a recent election.
- It shuts out smaller parties and moves us closer to a two-party system.
- The current make-up of the House of Commons **isn't very diverse or gender-balanced** - so many participants mentioned not seeing themselves reflected in the House.

“Our current system does not represent young Canadians...If I know my vote is going to be wasted because of the structure of the system, I am less likely to vote.” - Arian, Vancouver participant.

Improvements needed to our system

There were a lot of great ideas brought up about how we could improve our voting system. **A vast majority of the youth at our events favoured various proportional representation systems over winner-take-all systems.**² No clear preference for a type of proportional representation came through, but many of the participants clearly felt that there is a need to move towards something that accurately represents the will of voters and would also allow them to be able to vote for their first choice every election.

¹ Dropbox containing original participant feedback forms: <http://www.leadnow.ca/youthtownhallforms>

² In Vancouver: 66% of participants who completed our questionnaire put PR as their first choice for a voting system, in Toronto: 80% of participants put PR as their first choice. In Winnipeg we did not do a ranking question but 97% of participants indicated they support PR in general.

“PR encourages collaboration which might bring more unity, rather than the division we see now.” – Anonymous Winnipeg participant.

only youth, are heard.

- They expressed the need to better **engage young people in democracy** and encourage participation, particularly through the implementation of **more civic education**.
- Participants expressed a **general concern about accessibility**. For example, some mentioned the need to ensure that people living with disabilities can participate effectively, as well as people who live in remote and rural communities. There were a few people who also raised questions about allowing permanent residents to vote, and loosening restrictive voter ID laws so no one is disenfranchised. The idea of making Election Day a national holiday was a popular one. Opinions were split on online voting.

- Participants mentioned a desire to see **more collaboration and long-term thinking** from politicians and political parties. Some of the youth linked this to their concern for other issues and wanting to see high-quality legislation that would stand the test of time.
- Participants want measures taken to **improve gender balance and diversity** in Parliament so more under-represented groups, not

“The make-up and background of MPs are not reflective of the Canadian population.” – Stoney, Toronto participant

“With such major decisions being made about our future, young people deserve a say. One of the biggest crises in our democracy is lack of youth engagement - starting a habit of voting when people are still in high school paired with more voter education will increase turnout.” - Sophie, Vancouver participant.

Voting age

There wasn't a clear consensus on the topic of lowering the voting age to 16. Support for the idea ranged between 50% and 60% of participants at each event. Some participants felt that because many youth already have adult-like responsibilities at 16, they should also have a say in politics. Others thought it would be a good idea because it would make civics education in high school more tangible and would give us more opportunities to teach life-long voting habits. Those who were against it generally took the position that youth are not quite mature enough at 16 to be able to make an informed decision.

Conclusion and summary

We were very pleased with attendance at these events and felt that the quality of the discussion was very high. Each event collected written submissions from participants that are linked in this brief for your reference. The strongest takeaways from these events were:

- Participants feel that the current system is not working. Concerns about the fairness of first-past-the-post and wasted votes rated highly.
- They generally prefer proportional representation to other voting systems.
- Youth are also deeply concerned by improving accessibility and feel there is a dearth of consistent and high quality civic education aimed at youth.
- They are split on lowering the voting age

With reference to the committee's five principles, this is what we learned from our consultations:

Effectiveness and legitimacy: Youth felt the current system is not as effective as it could be, and that the phenomenon of wasted votes impacts the legitimacy of the overall result.

Voter engagement: Youth felt that the discouraging nature of how FPTP distorts results and makes some voters feel like voting is a waste of time could act as a deterrent to youth participation.

Accessibility and inclusiveness: Youth felt that we have improvements to make in terms of making the system more accessible to people living with disabilities and that it also needs to improve the diversity of people who are Members of Parliament.

Integrity: Youth expressed concern about online voting for reasons of maintaining the integrity of the system, while others felt that accessibility is important to consider and online voting could open the process up to new people.

Local representation: Youth like local representation and agree it is important, but were frustrated by having to vote strategically for their local representative. They want to see more engagement from their representatives in youth issues.

We hope that the committee will use this as a helpful snapshot of what young people are most concerned about when it comes to voting reform and will incorporate this feedback into your final recommendation.



Vancouver – Sept 27th



Winnipeg – Sept 28th (volunteers only)



Toronto – Sept 29th



Toronto – Oct 4th

Appendix

We've captured all the original participant feedback forms from the Vancouver, Winnipeg and Toronto events for your reference, and they can be found in this Dropbox folder:

<http://www.leadnow.ca/youthtownhallforms>