

# Research on the effect of question choice on the outcome of a referendum

**THERE ARE MANY CHALLENGES WITH REFERENDA AND PLEBISCITES. MOST SERIOUS OF THOSE IS THE IMPACT THE WORDING WILL HAVE ON THE OUTCOME.**

SUBMITTED BY COREY HOGAN



## THE BOTTOM LINE:

Subtle shifts in the wording of a referendum question can change the outcome.

As part of its mandate from the House of Commons the Special Committee on Electoral Reform has been directed “*to take into account the applicable constitutional, legal and implementation parameters in the development of its [recommendations on Electoral Reform]*” and it’s on that topic that I submit this brief.

There has been discussion in the media and among members of Parliament as of late that the appropriate way to implement changes to Canada’s voting system would be after a vote of Canadians by national referendum. It has been suggested that this would be more democratic than simply passing any such changes by Act of Parliament.

I write to argue that the opposite. Contrary to the popular belief that they are the purest form of democracy, referenda are the most gameable type of democracy. Complex issues are reduced to binary choices. Compromise is impossible. And most problematic of all: somebody has to pick the question. ***And by picking the question, you pick the outcome.***

It is the last point that is the focus of this submission. From July 5 to July 10 I ran three polls concurrently with three different wordings of a referendum on switching from first-past-the-post to proportional representation.

The purpose was to answer one very specific question: ***How much would the wording affect the outcome?***

To answer that question I used Google Consumer Surveys<sup>1</sup> to poll 1500 respondents on one of three different phrasings of a possible referendum question, resulting in 500 responses to each of the following:

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<sup>1</sup> “Google Consumer Surveys” is a market research offering by Google that leverages its advertising network to present questions to internet users. As a survey product, it is comparable to most online panels in that it recruits through advertisements, primarily differing in that the survey questions are presented inline to website visitors, rather than those visitors being funneled through a recruitment process. While not originally desired for public opinion poll surveys it has proven dependable, notably ranking second in terms of reliability and lack of bias in FiveThirtyEight’s post-election assessment of election polls in the 2012 US Election.

- Do you agree that Canada should update its voting method for federal elections to proportional representation?
- Should Canada eliminate first-past-the-post elections and replace them with proportional representation?
- Should Canada change the method it elects members of parliament from first-past-the-post to proportional representation?

It's important to pause and note what wasn't being tested: the popularity of switching to a system of proportional representation.

Google Consumer Surveys are designed to get the opinions of the internet population and are weighted accordingly - this is not a model of eligible or likely federal voters. Additionally, this survey was in English only and proportionality is a concept that can be implemented in a number of ways: MMP, STV, list PR, and others. An actual referendum would undoubtedly have language specific to the model proposed.

What was being tested was how subtle changes in the framing of a question impacts the results. To test this accurately care was taken to minimize confounding variables.

- ***Time in field.*** All surveys were in field at the time. This was to control against any events impacting support for proportional representation; if news impacted the level of support in one survey, it would impact the others in the same way.
- ***Audience composition.*** All audiences were drawn from pools at the same time in the same fashion.
- ***Survey construction.*** All queries were constructed in the same fashion: a single question is presented and two options are provided: "Yes" or "No".<sup>2</sup>

Below are the results of that survey. They are presented in two formats: weighted to the age, gender and regional composition of Canada and unweighted.

The full results tables are available from Google Consumer Surveys at these publicly accessible links: [bit.ly/prpoll1](http://bit.ly/prpoll1), [bit.ly/prpoll2](http://bit.ly/prpoll2), [bit.ly/prpoll3](http://bit.ly/prpoll3).

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<sup>2</sup> Unquestionably, further research could (and should) be done on the impact of answer options and presentation, but this was not the focus of this limited study. The data that does exist suggests option choice is also of great concern. Choosing which side is "Yes", or deciding how an option is described (eg. "status quo" vs. "current") is likely to have significant impact.

Do you agree that Canada should update its voting method for federal elections to proportional representation?

Yes  **58.3%** (+5.2 / -5.4)

No  **41.7%** (+5.4 / -5.2)

Weighted by Age, Gender. (388 responses)  
Unweighted: Yes - 56.0%, No - 44.0% (500 responses)

Should Canada eliminate first-past-the-post elections and replace them with proportional representation?

Yes  **47.1%** (+5.3 / -5.3)

No  **52.9%** (+5.3 / -5.3)

Weighted by Age, Gender. (357 responses)  
Unweighted: Yes - 45.2%, No - 54.8% (500 responses)

Should Canada change the method it elects members of parliament from first-past-the-post to proportional representation?

Yes  **45.8%** (+5.1 / -5.0)

No  **54.2%** (+5.0 / -5.1)

Weighted by Age, Gender. (384 responses)  
Unweighted: Yes - 48.6%, No - 51.4% (502 responses)

Just by changing the words used you can have a dramatic shift in results. Use the word "agree" instead of the word "should" and all of a sudden the yes side jumps a few points. Use "update" instead of "change" and you've shifted an election.

I would ask the committee to consider this: ***how democratic and fair is a process if changing two words can swing the outcome by 15 points?***

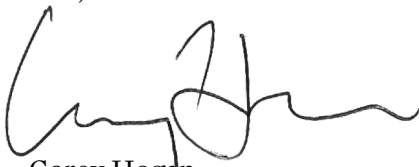
Referenda turn complicated questions into false dichotomies that are gameable by the political class in a way that you as representatives are not. No matter how many different ways you as representatives are asked your opinion on the issue of electoral reform you are going to give the same answer. That is as it should be and is one of the major features of a representative democracy.

***Democracy is not synonymous with voting*** and something is not more democratic simply because it is directly, rather than indirectly, asked. Democracy requires thoughtful deliberation, reconciliation of multiple points of view and mechanisms through which popular will can be accurately reflected. A referendum fails to deliver on any of these.

When you consider how to present your recommendations on the implementation of democratic reform I hope you'll remember that democracy is about more than just marking an X.

Ours is a representative democracy and you are our representatives. You determine when we go to war, when we go to jail. You make rules that dictate whether or not we can go to school or get medical care. These are life and death matters. Conclusions on these matters are reached after debate, consideration and compromise.

Certainly our electoral system deserves the same due care. A referendum is a crude and manipulable tool, and should not be used when considering a complex issue of such high importance.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Corey Hogan', written in a cursive style.

Corey Hogan  
Calgary, Alberta