

Brief submitted to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform
by John Dutton, Montreal, QC

What does voting mean?

This committee exists because of a perception among the Canadian government and the people of Canada that there is something wrong with the country's current electoral system. The right to vote is fundamental to democracy. But rights alone do not necessarily produce empowerment or inspire participation. It is the meaning of those rights – a combination of rational appreciation and emotional attachment – that give them value and spur involvement in the political process.

In my professional life, both as an author and a marketing copywriter, I specialize in communicating meaning. Therefore my personal contribution to the debate over electoral reform is the humble suggestion made in this short brief that any and all changes being discussed must not only be analyzed from the perspective of social and political fairness and empowerment, but also of personal meaning.

This committee is considering a number of different voting systems and methods that are used around the world. Voter participation statistics and electoral outcomes are important to analyze, but I would respectfully steer this committee's attention away from pure numbers for the duration of time that it considers my brief. In order to make a full and fair assessment of the impact that any particular electoral reforms would make, it will be necessary and useful to study the meaning that such reforms would convey.

It is beyond the scope of this brief and this committee to ponder deeper questions regarding the meaning of democracy itself. Since I am not an expert in either political philosophy, electoral procedures or voting systems, I will leave it to others more qualified

than me to assess the advantages and disadvantages of the various voting systems and methods used in other countries in comparison to the single turn plurality voting system we currently use in Canada. However I am an expert in establishing and changing perception and behaviour. What follows will therefore be argued from a qualitative rather than quantitative perspective.

The only statistic I will refer to is this: although voter turnout in the October 2015 federal election was higher than in the 2011 election, a significant proportion of registered voters nevertheless chose not to vote¹. This proportion varies by province and age group and reason for not voting, but is high enough to provide evidence that for many Canadians of voting age, the act of voting itself is meaningless or at least not meaningful enough to find the time or energy to engage in. A full 30% of Canadians aged 25 to 44 who did not vote in the 2015 election did not vote because they were too busy². Yet it is not an unreasonable assumption that many of this same 30% of Canadians managed to find a half-hour on election day to watch sports or entertainment. When celebrities and teams hold more meaning than the process by which we choose our government, we can conclude not only that the process is broken, but that it lacks intrinsic, deep-rooted meaning for Canadians.

What does it mean to walk to a polling station and mark an X on a ballot in a general election? What does it mean to see a list of local candidates on a ballot, when mainstream and social media overwhelming cover national party messages and statements by party leadership?

With the current system, it could mean voting for the local representative of a national party whose ideals and platform one agrees with. It could also mean voting for the leader of a national party because of an affinity with the leader's personality. It could mean voting for a candidate whose party has a reasonable chance of defeating another party that one dislikes (strategic voting). It could mean voting for a local politician based on promises that will impact one's everyday local life.

However the meaning of "local" has been redefined by modern mass communications, especially the internet, compared to its meaning when our voting system was established

and it took two days to travel from Montreal to Sherbrooke. Therefore a local MP, while still holding immense value as the voice of a town or neighbourhood in Parliament, may have diminished relative importance in contemporary life compared to the party she or he belongs to. Social groups are now infinitely more complex geographically due to social media. The friends and family that one interacts with on a daily basis can be located anywhere in the country, and their issues become our issues, whether they involve a pipeline protest or a municipal pit bull ban.

Thus the nexus of meaning for everyday life in the age of the internet has surpassed geographic location, and although voter participation levels were falling before the advent of social media, a voting system that emphasizes the meaning of local candidates and yet produces a national result is fast shifting from a historical legacy to a meaningless anachronism.

Therefore for a voting system to truly represent the broad interests of eligible voters, it should balance the traditional meaning of local representation for people who value having a local MP with the contemporary meaning of national involvement for people who want their vote to definitively count toward the national election result.

Other ways to counter low voter participation are compulsory voting (possibly with a fine like that imposed for failure to fill out census forms) and the addition of remote voting methods such as online voting.

With regard to the first of these measures, I would urge the committee to consider what compulsory voting means to a Canadian who has avoided voting in past elections. Would making voting compulsory place it in the same category as filling out a census, paying taxes or doing jury duty? In other words, would it convey the meaning that voting is a solemn civic duty that is not to be ignored or taken lightly? Would this therefore not only increase voter turnout but change the psychological attitude towards democratic participation among those who currently feel excluded from the process? Should compulsory voting include an option to abstain so that those who wish to make a “protest vote” can have their voice too?

With regard to adopting online voting methods, we must acknowledge that Canadians of all ages and social groups “vote” on a regular basis when they like social media posts or participate in online polls. This behaviour should not be dismissed as irrelevant to participation in the democratic process. There is a fundamental lesson to be learned from the likes of Facebook when users find meaning and feel empowered by the simple click of a mouse. A similar action to cast one’s vote in an election would be inherently no less solemn than the simple marking of an X on a ballot, as long as the context and process were perceived to be trustworthy and legitimate.

Public consultations on electoral reform that are currently being held aim to discover how we could increase the empowerment of being a stakeholder in Canada’s democratic process. What does being a “stakeholder” mean? It means owning a quantifiable participation (one’s stake). But this ownership can only ever be meaningful if that stake is quantified at every election. In other words by a system that tallies all votes in a final total (perhaps through proportional representation or mixed voting) rather than the first-past-the-post system we currently use.

As it stands, it is all too easy for a citizen to believe that their vote might be meaningless with a single turn plurality voting system because “first-past-the-post” negates the votes cast on behalf of all losing candidates.

Whichever voting system and methods are ultimately chosen, Canada owes it to Canadians to consign to the scrap heap of history the idea that “my vote doesn’t count,” because this phrase could equally be formulated as “my participation in the democratic process is meaningless.”

The way to bring government closer to the people and ensure that our democratic process retains its legitimacy, engagement, inclusiveness, integrity and accountability is to ensure that all eligible voters are able to say to themselves on election morning: “My vote means something, both literally, in terms of making a concrete and equal choice regarding who represents my interests in Parliament, but also figuratively, in the sense that I trust the country’s political process and feel included in Canadian democracy.”

Thank you to the members of the committee for taking the time to consider this brief.

References

1. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/160222/dq160222a-eng.htm>
2. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/160222/t002a-eng.htm>