

Brief to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

Author: Sharon Reeves on behalf of the Electoral Reform Consultation Organizing Committee, Global Justice Working Group, First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa

The organizers of this event would like to thank the Special Committee on Electoral Reform for giving us the opportunity to input into your process.

Summary

The Global Justice Working Group of the First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa held an educational event on electoral reform (ER) on Tuesday, September 27, 2016. The event took the form of a town hall and was held on the church premises at 30 Cleary Avenue, Ottawa. Approximately 75 people attended.

Key findings

Participants overwhelmingly supported the following:

- The principle that the number of parliamentary seats of each party should correspond to its share of the popular vote.
- The First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) voting system is unfair and should be replaced with some form of proportional representation (PR).
- The idea that a government should be obliged to consult with other parties when passing legislation.

Participants indicated that their preferred system of PR was Mixed Member Proportional (MMP), followed by Single Transferable Vote (STV). Rural-Urban Proportional (RUP) came last, possibly because it's relatively new and people are not as familiar with it.

Through responses to a questionnaire they also indicated their views about:

- Strategic voting
- Local representation
- Coalition governments
- Long-term policy development
- Increasing the number of women in Parliament and
- Ensuring that votes matter equally in safe or swing ridings.

Event Description

The MC gave a brief overview of the electoral reform process and spoke about the Special Committee on Electoral Reform guiding principles.

After this Julien Lamarche, the president of the National Capital Region (NCR) chapter of Fair Vote Canada (FVC), gave a comprehensive presentation on

various voting systems including First-Past-the-Post (FPTP), Mixed Member Proportional (MMP), Single Transferable Vote (STV), and Rural-Urban Proportional (RUP). This was followed by a half hour Q & A. Participants were then invited to fill out a questionnaire developed by FVC. The rest of this report will highlight responses to some key questions contained in the questionnaire. 46 participants filled it out.

Participant Demographics

Age Groups:

- Below 20: 0%
- 20 - 29: 0%
- 30 - 39: 11%
- 40 - 49: 2%
- 50 - 59: 7%
- 60 - 69: 37%
- 70 or older: 41%

Gender

Women: 54%

Men: 41%.

Transgendered: 2%

No reply: 2%

Questionnaire

When looking at the responses to some of the key questions some interesting trends emerged. Perhaps the important question on the questionnaire asks participants to indicate where they stand on the statement “Ensure that the number of parliamentary seats of each party should correspond to its share of the popular vote”. 100% of respondents agreed with this principle - 85% indicated that this was of fundamental importance, while 15% replied that it was very important.

Respondents made their opinions about FPTP very clear. 87% indicated that they understand FPTP very well or quite well and 92% replied that FPTP was very or mostly unfair. In answer to the question “There is no requirement for the

winning party to have majority voter support to form a majority government under our current First-Past-the-Post system. A share of 40% or less usually suffices. What are your views about this?" 65% of respondents replied that it is profoundly undemocratic and that the *share of the seats should be equal to the share of the votes*. 33% stated that it is problematic because it gives an unfair amount of power to the winning party. This adds up to a whopping 98%.

In response to the question "Which is preferable to you? A government with a majority able to pass legislation without the support of other parties or a government that is obliged to consult with other parties" 91% voted for a government that is obliged to consult with other parties. There was no support at all for the first statement. The remaining 9% either didn't know or didn't answer.

Conversely, when presented with the statement "Make it easy to have majority governments led by the party with the greatest share of the seats with or without a majority of votes cast" 61% of respondents indicated that they did not consider this to be important at all and an additional 18% did not consider it to be very important. Only 9% of the participants stated that to them this was of fundamental importance. When asked to respond to the statement "Encourage the dominance of two major parties" the reaction was even more pronounced. 74% of respondents stated that this was not at all important and only 2% indicated that it was of fundamental importance.

When asked what their choice would be between keeping the current FPTP system or changing it, 93% of respondents opted for replacing FPTP with some form of proportional representation (PR), where the number of seats in Parliament approximates each party's share of the vote. Only 2% suggested that adding ranked ballot with instant runoff to the current system would be acceptable and no one voted for keeping the current system. The remaining 5% did not answer the question. When asked to indicate how strongly they felt about their choice 59% of the participants stated that it was of the utmost importance to them, while an additional 24% replied that it was very important.

When asked about their preferred system of PR, 39% indicated it was MMP, 17% indicated it was STV and 11% stated it was RUP. It's possible that RUP got a low vote because it's new and people are not as familiar with it.

When asked if they voted for their first preference in the last election or whether they voted strategically, 54% stated that they voted for their first choice but a fairly significant 37% indicated that they had voted strategically. A PR voting system will eliminate the need for strategic voting and would likely result in profoundly different results. Perhaps because of that, earlier in the questionnaire, in response to the statement "Make it unnecessary for voters to

vote strategically” 65% of responders considered this to be of fundamental importance and an additional 20% considered it to be very important.

With respect to local representation 44% of respondents indicated that it was not at all/not very important to have one single MP per riding compared to 22% who indicated that it was quite/very important. 20% of respondents sat on the fence for this question.

The results were clearer for the statement “Prioritize multi-member ridings large enough to ensure proportionality”. 74% stated that this was very/fundamentally important compared to 2% who thought it wasn’t important at all. In this example 13% of respondents sat on the fence.

76% of participants responded positively (very/fundamentally important) to the statement “Encourage the formation of coalition governments representing a majority of the electorate” compared to 2% who considered it unimportant. 17% took the middle of the road on this statement and 4% didn’t respond.

Since policy lurch is a frequent problem with FPTP governments it was interesting to see the responses to the statement “Encourage politicians to take a long-term policy perspective”. 83% of participants considered it to be very/fundamentally important. No one considered this to be unimportant. 11% of participants did not respond to this statement and 7% took the middle ground.

Concerning the issue of increasing diversity in the House of Commons, 85% of respondents indicated that it was very/fundamentally important to elect more women to Parliament as opposed to 4% who thought it was not very important. 11% indicated that they were neutral on this issue.

80% of participants agreed that it was very/fundamentally important to ensure that votes matter equally in safe or swing ridings as opposed to 4% who indicated that it was not very important. 9% of participants did not respond to this.

Recommendation

Given the overwhelming level of support participants at this event gave to a voting system based on PR, the Organizing Committee of the event respectfully requests that the Special Committee on Electoral Reform recommends a made-in-Canada designed voting system that will result in proportional representation.

About the Organization

The First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa is a spiritual community of 500-plus people who come from many different backgrounds. We are made up of people from different religions, ethnicities, races, sexual orientations and socio-economic backgrounds. The First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa dates back to the late 1800's.

Appendix A7 Comments

PRO PR

1. Proportionality in whatever form best suits Canada is an absolute necessity. False majorities have all the negative effects we have endured in the last number of years. My grandfather and great uncle did not fight and, in the case of my great uncle, die to have the undemocratic electoral system that we have currently. They and us deserve better!
2. Proportional representation is a must. Seats must be according to vote %.
3. I feel that a change to as close as possible to proportion representation is necessary. However I found all these options hard to follow with just one presentation (this was my first real attempt to learn about the possibilities). A great deal of effort will be needed to explain the chosen system to the "average voter" to make him/her eager/willing to vote.
4. Thanks to FUCO for providing the forum and questionnaire. I admit to being an election practices & proposed changes neophyte or worse. I found this evening's meeting rather overwhelming and have answered to the best of my ability in the time allotted. Given more time to think and analyze I might have answered differently but I feel the current system is unfair and not representative and that another system should be adopted.
5. My priority: when a voter expresses their concerns through voting for a candidate that reflects their concerns, that vote should directly impact the presence of those concerns in Parliament. Whether the person expressing those concerns is the local MP or a regional MP is not relevant to me. FPTP fails to produce this and should be replaced by some form of PR. It is hard to feel motivated to vote when you know in advance that your vote won't count.
6. The system chosen should be kept 'simple' - otherwise 'confusion' will keep people away!! Also good education of Canadian citizens!! Finally good education of the media - who tend to throw up arms in despair and say it won't work!!
7. I prefer MMP with best losers like Germany.
8. I'd love to have universal direct vote like in the third world, so simple!!

9. Any system needs to be easily explainable/understandable to Canadians
Implementation is important, i.e. don't rush to do before the next election - get it right!!

10. Worried that proportional systems too complicated for voters to understand -
pick the one that can be best understood and easiest to vote while still being
more proportional than current system.

COMPLEXITY OF PR

1. Any new system has to be clearly understandable.
2. Many of the options for PR presented are far too complex and to many people will not appear very transparent.

REFERENDA

1. A referendum is not needed to bring in a PR reform.
2. I oppose holding a national referendum on proposed change!

MISCELLANEOUS

1. PR could increase the number of parties and make governing more difficult.
2. Ask whether voters spoiled their ballots in question 25. Very different than "did not vote".
3. Do not increase the number of MPs. If it is required to increase riding sizes to not have more members then increase the riding sizes.
4. We fail as a society if the youth are not involved.
5. I am afraid online voting would be abused. Many might be coerced into giving someone else their voting info. We need paper trail to ensure accurate recounts. No hacking.
Incentives are better than mandatory. Give us back \$5/VOTE to party.
6. What about runoff elections?
- 7 Major change will likely cut the connection between elected members and their districts.