

Brantford-Brant Electoral Reform

Community Forum Report

Introduction and Summary

On Sunday, October 2, 2016, the Brantford-Brant Liberal Commission Clubs hosted a multi-Party Community Forum on Electoral Reform in Brantford, Ontario. Approximately 50 people attended the event which was held in a theatre style auditorium on the Brantford Campus of Wilfrid Laurier University. Representatives of the Conservative, Liberal, NDP, and Green political parties were contacted and invited to participate in this non-partisan event. There were individuals affiliated with each of these parties who participated on the day as speakers, including the local MP. In addition, two representatives of Fair Vote Canada attended, and were welcomed by the organizers to address questions of a technical nature about the various alternatives (First Past the Post (FPTP), Alternative or Preferential Vote (APV), List Proportional Representation (LPR), Single Transferable Vote (STV), Mixed Member Proportional (MMP), and Rural-Urban Proportional (RUP)).

The agenda provided for a welcome and overview of the electoral reform engagement process, a review of the guiding principles, an overview of five alternatives, and breakout sessions. As well, there was spontaneous discussion amongst the participants of the pros and cons of the various alternatives, and informal questions and answers. Participants sought, shared and debated information knowledgeably.

After review and discussion of the alternatives, participants formed small groups to discuss the individual questions which included preferred electoral systems, opinions on the need for a national referendum on changing the electoral system from first past the post, democratic engagement, mandatory voting, online voting and electronic voting. Each group assigned a note taker and speaker. Time did not allow for the results of each group to be presented to the whole audience; however, the notes were collected by the organizers and reflected in this report.

A survey was also distributed to all participants on the questions being discussed. The most preferred electoral system among the audience was Mixed-Member Proportional, there was strong opposition to holding a national referendum where voters would be asked to choose between first past the post and an alternative, and majority support for online voting and electronic voting provided that important safeguards are put in place to protect security and privacy.

Recommendations based on the feedback received include adopting a proportional electoral system that preserves local representation, avoiding a national referendum on changing from first-past-the-post, more outreach to the electorate between elections on the importance of democratic engagement, not adopting mandatory voting and only adopting electronic or online voting if concerns regarding them are addressed.

GENERAL DIALOGUE ABOUT ELECTORAL AND DEMOCRATIC REFORM

This is one of the most important discussions with Canadians in our modern history. However, audience members shared their opinions that there are too few Canadians engaged, too little time, and the alternatives are not well enough or broadly enough understood. There is a great deal of suspicion and distrust which must be addressed through informed and unbiased sharing of information. Although there is a strong voice for a simple and straightforward system like FPTP, the resounding chorus of a growing number of voices who are lost in this system can no longer be ignored. There is a clear call for change in our electoral system.

While the need for change is pressing and urgent, the participants recognize the gravity and complexity of the question at hand. They want to ensure that the change they bring about is well understood and the implementation well thought out. We don't want the challenges of change further complicated by technical glitches that result in a true crisis of democracy. We want to be progressive, but prudent.

In order to have a productive national debate, we have to move beyond traditional fear mongering and political divisiveness. We need to engage in an honest national discussion of the pros and cons of the various alternatives to make a well informed decision on which is the best system for Canada.

DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

In their breakout groups, the participants discussed the features and principles which were important to them in a democratic system. We have tried to capture all of the principles that were reflected in those groups. It is important to note that not all participants necessarily shared all of the principles below. However, we are reflecting them all and all are presented with equal importance.

- Geographic diversity: Canada is a large country and our government should be representative of our geographic diversity.
- Broad and Informed voter participation: In order for elections to be more effective and legitimate, we must have broader voter participation. At the same time, participation must be informed in order to be effective. It was widely discussed that the question of proportional representation (i.e. seeing a direction connection between ones vote and a seat in the house) would encourage greater engagement.
- Local representation: Having a local representative that is accountable to the local electorate. There was concern expressed about who those elected from party lists may be accountable to.
- Government should be representative of at least 50% of the population: In whatever system is chosen, the governing body (whether single party or coalition) should be reflective of the votes of at least 50% of the population.
- Balance Rural/Urban Interests: We recognize that rural and urban interests vary, and that by definition urban areas will have greater population by area. While we have long held a representation by population approach to governance, we need to balance the needs and representation of both urban and rural areas.
- Voluntary/Civic Duty: While we want to have greater participation, it was generally held that we cannot compel people to vote. It was also noted that even if voting is mandatory, there is no way to enforce informed voting. Voting should be seen and promoted as a civic duty.

- Voting online/inclusion/accessibility: It was commonly mentioned that voting has to be more inclusive and accessible, but there were serious security concerns with online voting.
- Transparent and more honest communication to the electorate: Find ways to get rid of or at least lessen attack ads!
- Clear understandable choices: The electoral system must present clear and understandable choices to voters. The voting process must be manageable, particularly for those with accessibility and literacy challenges (noted that long lists of names make it difficult for some people – colours, symbols, and other alternatives should be considered).
- Avoiding instability: there was significant concern that proportional representation could lead to greater instability in government because fringe groups or candidates could form and have a disruptive effect.
- Stability: Elections should only be held on a regular and fixed schedule. Opinions were expressed that if a coalition or minority government loses the confidence of the house, another leader should be chosen from among the representatives to form a new government for the balance of the term, rather than simply going back to a general election.
- Simplicity: FPTP works well for simplicity of election results and effectiveness and accountability of government (one party represented for good governance).
- Diversity: Proportional representation would allow small groups to have a formal voice in the system; want all votes count which is best be done in proportional representation.

CANADIAN FEDERAL ELECTORAL REFORMS

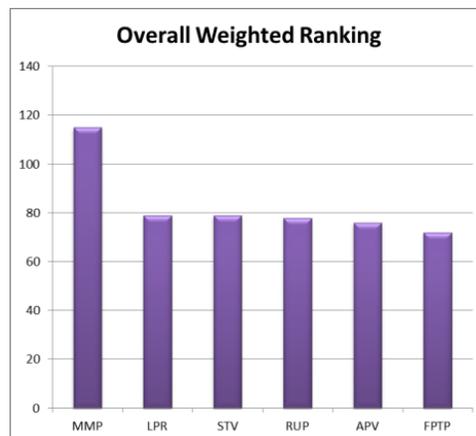
Ranking of Preferred Electoral Systems

The participants were polled in a survey to solicit an informal ranking of the six alternatives. Of the 38 people who returned the survey, 6 chose not to respond to this question and 4 indicated that they did not have enough information or knowledge to rank the alternatives at this time.

Of the 28 respondents, MMP was the clear favourite with almost 39.2% of the first ballots. Interestingly, FPTP received the second highest number of first ballots (21.4%), but was also was the overwhelming last choice with 46.4% of the sixth rank votes. When the votes of the least preferred alternatives are redistributed, MMP becomes the choice of more than half of the respondents. In weighting the rankings overall, the following would be the overall references:

Weighted Results

MMP	115
LPR	79
STV	79
RUP	78
APV	76
FPTP	72



Among those that strongly preferred alternative/preferential ballot, there was a sense that Urban-Rural Proportional might be an acceptable compromise – for a mixed urban-rural riding like Brantford-Brant, there was a hope that under such a system, that the riding could retain a single representative (elected through a ranked ballot) and not have its boundaries extended, while still allowing for proportionality to be applied at a wider regional level.

Why don't Canadians engage in the democratic process?

The themes of this discussion centred around people being disillusioned, disconnected, and ultimately disinterested. Many feel that their vote doesn't count. Everyone is busy and we all have to make choices about how and where we spend our precious time. If the result is going to be the same regardless, i.e. the status quo will win (regardless of which party), why would I bother to waste my time getting informed, getting involved, or getting out to vote? Many simply believe that their voice is not heard. And many perceive (rightly or wrongly) that the decisions made in Ottawa are not relevant to their daily lives. People are disillusioned with the conduct of politicians in the house and the negative attack ads exacerbate these negative sentiments.

How could we encourage greater participation?

Participants reflected that more round tables and public education programming between elections would help (positive, informative). More outreach with voters OUTSIDE of election times was advocated by many. Youth could be encouraged to vote by improving education in schools, emphasizing civic duty, celebrating the first vote for young Canadians, and engaging online. A change in the electoral system could also lead to a greater sense that their vote will count, no matter their political preference.

Mandatory voting

While many individuals expressed a desire that everyone should vote, there was discomfort expressed with making it mandatory among the majority of participants in the forum. On the survey distributed, 14 (43.75%) individuals supported mandatory voting, 18 (56.25%) opposed and 6 did not provide a response.

Voting online and casting ballots electronically at polling stations

Provided that the traditional paper ballot continues to be available, there was broad support for online and electronic voting. There were 15 (57.7%) survey respondents who supported online voting, 11 (42.3%) opposed and 12 non-responses. The number in favour, opposed and non-responses was identical for some form of electronic voting. While supportive, it was also broadly recognized that there are a number of technological and security concerns which must be adequately address in order for online or electronic voting to be adopted.

Concerns included:

- Technological: Takes time to design and build a reliable system
- Technological: What happens if the system crashes during an election? Are the results lost? How long would it take to determine the government?
- Technological: If there is no paper trail, how are recounts or challenges processed? (two individuals indicated they would only support electronic voting if a paper ballot was still issued)

- Security: What happens if the system is hacked?
- Privacy: How do we ensure one person; one vote without personally identifying the voter?
- Democracy: Would need to be independent of government or parties to not to influence the vote
- Democracy: How do we ensure the person voting online is the person to whom the vote belongs, and not someone else voting for them? (e.g., a person voting on behalf of their spouse with an e-mail is shared)

Advantages

- Youth engagement: Online voting would likely engage more youth to vote
- Reduced need for advance polls: More voting on the election day because you can vote from anywhere
- Overseas voters / students can more easily vote for home riding
- Reduced costs for polling stations
- Easier for people with mobility issues

REFERENDUM

Some participants felt strongly that the current FPTP system is okay as it is, and that there is no need to change it. However, there was a much stronger voice for the need for a different system. The strongest voice was the need for more information in order to make an informed decision.

For those seeking change, the concern about a referendum centred around three themes:

- i) Political uncertainty: If we don't do it now, the next government may not give us the chance;
- ii) Misinformation: A referendum on whether or not change is required will be divisive over fear of change and debate over which alternative to use, and will fail to reasonably inform and engage Canadians;
- iii) Apathy: Concern that a referendum on whether or not to change the electoral system will fail to engage the majority of Canadians.

While those who support the referendum on change advocate that it will lend popular legitimacy to accept whatever the change is on the part of the public, others argued that electoral reform was a significant part of the Liberal platform and the 2015 election was therefore a referendum on change.

There was also concern by a few that the current system is corrupt, filled with loop holes, and the process being manipulated, and therefore a referendum is required to present the clear choice to Canadians.

While some noted that a referendum could reduce the chance that any decision could be constitutionally challenged afterwards, others responded that the granting of the vote to Indigenous Canadians and women was done without a referendum.

What was commonly agreed is that the people of Canada need to be well informed on the alternatives before any referendum will be meaningful.

An idea presented by some participants is for a referendum to be held solely on alternative electoral systems Canada could use in the next (2023) and subsequent elections and spending the next four years building and testing the infrastructure and educating the people of Canada on how the systems would work through broad, accessible multi-channel engagement.

However, among the audience as a whole, the opposition to a national referendum on electoral reform was strong with 23 (74.2%) respondents against, 8 (25.8%) respondents in favour and 7 non-respondents. It should be noted however that this question did not consider the possibility of having a referendum solely on alternative options.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recognized that the audience at this electoral reform forum was not fully representative of the Canadian electorate, but based on the survey responses and feedback received from discussion at this event, the following is recommended:

1. If a new electoral system is to be put in place for the 2019 federal election, it should be a system that incorporates proportionality while preserving local representation.
2. If a national referendum is to be pursued on electoral reform, it should only consider alternatives to the electoral system to avoid the divisiveness of a campaign simply about change versus status quo. Furthermore, extensive education on electoral system alternatives should be provided to the electorate by Elections Canada in advance of any referendum.
3. Mandatory voting should not be put in place for the 2019 federal election.
4. If online or electronic voting are to be put in place for the 2019 federal election, there must be supreme confidence in protecting privacy and security and a means of still processing recounts and challenges to results.
5. The Canadian government and Elections Canada should invest in a campaign that operates between elections to further promote the importance and value of democratic engagement.

CONCLUSION

There is a clear message that for many Canadians, First Past the Post no longer works for Canada. Increasingly, Canadians have become disengaged and disconnected from governance decisions because their voices are not heard, their votes do not affect the composition of Parliament, and governments are elected by a minority of voters through negative and divisive politics.

At the same time, there is great uncertainty about what change would mean for Canada and how it would be implemented. We have long held notions of 'rep by pop' defining democracy deep in our cultural heritage. We have always identified with geographic representation, and voting for a single representative who comes from where we live and whom we can hold accountable the decisions made.

The key to addressing these challenges is facilitating an honest, transparent, unbiased, informative, and realistic conversation about the alternatives. Canadians are seeking an electoral a system which is more engaging and accessible; one that delivers a government that more representative of our broad and diverse nation, both

geographically and ideologically, and one which embraces more inclusive and collaborative decision making while still preserving local representation.

Canadians are proud of our democracy and a shift to a form of proportional representation would represent a significant change to that democracy. The transition cannot just be about democracy, the decision must be made with legitimacy. The consultations taking place across the country, the reports from community groups and MPs and the all-party Committee in Parliament are part of establishing this level of legitimacy, but it will still be important for any changes adopted to be broadly accepted by Canadians. If the broad collection of consultations and reports are indicating that Canadians are far from consensus or understanding on the issues being discussed in these forums, a decision to take more time before implementing changes to the electoral system should be considered. In such a case, it may be more prudent to potentially have a referendum simply on alternatives to First Past the Post in 2019 as opposed to instituting a new system for this election. However, our audience did show a preference for a new system to be in place for 2019 without a referendum.

In the session on October 2nd, the majority of participants were able to glean enough information about the electoral reform to decide changes are needed in our system. A further clear preference was shown for a proportionally representative alternative. It is hoped that the education and discussion continues and that our next election and those after it are more inclusive, engaging and better reflect the choices and desires of Canadians.