



RESPONSE TO PETITION

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PETITION No.: **421-01767**

BY: **MR. VANDAL (SAINT BONIFACE-SAINT VITAL)**

DATE: **OCTOBER 31, 2017**

PRINT NAME OF SIGNATORY: **ANDY FILLMORE**

Response by the Minister of Democratic Institutions

SIGNATURE

Minister or Parliamentary Secretary

SUBJECT

Electoral system

ORIGINAL TEXT

REPLY

The Government of Canada is pleased to respond to this petition.

The Government of Canada is committed to improving and strengthening our democracy. Our electoral system is the most foundational piece of our democracy. At its core, it is a question of how we, as Canadians, govern ourselves.

The Government's view has been clear: changes to the electoral system should not be made if they lack the broad support of Canadians. Before proceeding with electoral system changes, the Government took time and took steps to engage Canadians in a national conversation.

The Government of Canada led an engagement tour that travelled throughout the country, visiting every province and territory. Led by the Minister of Democratic Institutions and the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Democratic Institutions, the tour offered Canadians an opportunity to discuss and debate a wide range of issues.

Additionally, the Government worked with Opposition parties to establish an all-party Special Committee of the House of Commons. The Committee conducted an extensive study and on December 1, 2016 produced a thorough report that documents the many complexities of strengthening our democracy. The Government of Canada thanks the Special Committee for its thoughtful, diligent report, and all those Canadians who participated in the Committee's activities.

Members of Parliament were encouraged to hold town halls to listen to the views of their constituents. The Special Committee's Report includes information on town halls held by Members of Parliament from every political party represented in the House of Commons.

The Special Committee's report did not include a recommendation to lower the voting age. However, two of its recommendations are worth examination in this context:

"Recommendation 9: The Committee recommends that, working with the provinces and territories, the Government explore ways in which youth under 18 years of age could be registered in the National Register of Electors, preferably through the school system, up to two years in advance of reaching voting age."

The Government agrees with this recommendation and has included the creation of a National Register of Future Electors in the proposed amendments to the *Canada Elections Act* currently before Parliament (Bill C-33). The Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) recommended that one way of preparing young people to vote would be by introducing youth pre-registration. The amendments to the *Canada Elections Act* would allow Elections Canada to work with young people in schools and other settings to sign up to vote. Pre-registration would be open to Canadian youth ages 14-17. They would be added to a new National Register of Future Electors, maintained by Elections Canada, facilitating access to educational resources and other information about democracy, elections and voting. When they turn 18, future electors will automatically be added to the National Register of Electors, putting them in a better position to vote.

"Recommendation 10: The Committee recommends that the Government accord Elections Canada the additional mandate, and necessary resources, to encourage greater voter participation, including through initiatives such as Civix's Student Vote, and by better raising awareness among Canadians of existing options to vote prior to Election Day (voting at an advance poll, voting by mail, voting at any Elections Canada office)."

The Government agrees that Elections Canada should have a mandate to encourage greater voter participation, and steps are being taken through Bill C-33. Currently, the CEO may only conduct educational programs with primary and high school age children. The CEO recommended that his mandate be extended to undertake this kind of non-partisan public education work for all Canadians. Lack of information about voting can be a barrier to voting. The measure proposed under Bill C-33 will lift this limit and allow the CEO to communicate with Canadians without restrictions.

From December 5, 2016 to January 15, 2017, more than 360,000 individuals within Canada participated in MyDemocracy.ca to provide their insight into our democratic values. MyDemocracy.ca was an innovative initiative designed to engage as many people as possible in this important conversation. Postcards were mailed to every Canadian household asking Canadians to call or go online to share their thoughts about Canada's democratic values.

The results of this engagement revealed that 66 per cent of Canadians oppose lowering the federal voting age, with only 20 per cent of Canadians expressing support for the idea. Though there is greater support for lowering the federal voting age among younger Canadians than there is among older Canadians, the majority of Canadians aged 18 to 29 still oppose the measure.

The Government of Canada would like to thank all Canadians who took part in these consultations. The Government listened to Canadians carefully and gained valuable insights into Canadian democracy.

As mentioned above, the Government has introduced Bill C-33, which proposes amendments to the *Canada Elections Act* to repeal elements of the previous government's *Fair Elections Act*, among other measures. The Bill contains seven measures which would make it easier for Canadians to vote and enhance public trust in the integrity of the electoral process. Two of these measures – creating a National Register of Future Electors and expanding the CEO's mandate to undertake broad public education campaigns – are mentioned above. The other five measures are as follows:

- Bill C-33 would repeal the *Fair Elections Act* provision excluding the Voter Information Card (VIC) from the list of acceptable identification. The VIC is the most current and accurate form of government-issued proof of residence during an election. Of electors who have difficulty with identification requirements, the difficulty is typically with proof of residence. Of the few forms of official identification featuring residence information, the

most common is a driver's licence which is often not carried by youth, disabled Canadians, seniors, Indigenous peoples, urban dwellers in major city centres, and homeless electors. Elections Canada conducted pilot projects during by-elections in 2010 and in the 2011 general election that demonstrated the VIC could help many of these groups to vote. During the 2011 general election, approximately 900,000 Canadians at 5,608 polling stations were eligible to use the VIC as identification and a significant percentage of these did so. If passed, Bill C-33 would make it easier for people to vote by allowing the CEO to authorize the VIC as an approved form of identification.

- Bill C-33 would repeal the attestation mechanism introduced by the *Fair Elections Act* and restore the vouching system for electors voting without adequate identification. Currently, only electors with two pieces of proof of identity may make use of the attestation mechanism to establish their residence. The vouching process would allow electors without proof of identity to vote. A February 2016 survey by Statistics Canada found that an estimated 172,000 non-voters stated that a lack of identification was a reason for not voting in the 2015 election. Indigenous people in particular were impacted by this. Restoring vouching will make it easier for people to vote.
- Bill C-33 would provide the CEO with tools to continually improve Elections Canada's National Register of Electors, on which it is estimated there is a very small proportion of people who are not eligible to vote because of their citizenship status. Elections Canada will be able to identify and contact individuals who may not be eligible to vote and verify their status, before removing them from the National Register, if necessary. A bill was introduced in the previous Parliament by the Government of Canada to address this issue, but it did not become law.
- Bill C-33 would increase public confidence in the independence of the Commissioner of Canada Elections and to foster effective cooperation with Elections Canada. From 1974 to 2014, the CEO appointed the Commissioner, who reported to the Chief Electoral Officer within Elections Canada while maintaining a rigorously independent investigation function. The *Fair Elections Act* transferred the Commissioner to the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions. The Director reports through the Attorney General to Parliament, unlike the CEO who reports directly to Parliament. The Government heard from Canadians during the Electoral Reform Dialogue that there were concerns the Commissioner could be subject to less independence. If passed, Bill C-33 would enhance the integrity of the election system by clarifying this situation.
- Bill C-33 would expand the right to vote to over 1 million Canadians living abroad. Today, Canadians living abroad may only vote within five years of leaving Canada and must have an intention to return. These restrictions are currently being challenged before the Supreme Court of Canada. If passed, Bill C-33 would remove these barriers to voting and will extend voting rights to these Canadians living abroad. The *Canada Elections Act* will continue to require Canadian citizens to have lived in Canada at one time if they wish to vote.

The Government of Canada has also introduced legislation to make political fundraising more open and transparent. If passed, Bill C-50, *An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act* (political financing) will enact an advertising and reporting regime for fundraising events attended by Ministers, party leaders or leadership contestants.

Further, the Government is taking steps to protect the integrity of Canada's democracy by defending the Canadian electoral process from hacking and malicious cyber activities. On June 16, 2016, the Government welcomed the Communications Security Establishment's report entitled "Cyber Threats to Canada's Democratic Process". The assessment examines cyber threat activity against the democratic process in Canada and around the world over the past ten years.

Collaboration with provinces and territories is an important element to strengthening our democratic institutions. On November 3, 2017, the Minister of Democratic Institutions met with counterparts from a number of provinces and territories to discuss the importance of civic engagement and efforts to improve accessibility and participation in our democratic process. The Ministers in attendance also committed to continuing a collaborative discussion on ways to strengthen and safeguard our democracy at the provincial, territorial and federal levels.

Thank you for sharing your thoughts about youth voting and engagement and strengthening Canada's democracy. The Government of Canada values the input of all Canadians who take the time to engage. The Government will continue to focus its efforts to make our democracy stronger by removing barriers to voting, encouraging participation, strengthening and safeguarding our democratic institutions, and ensuring it represents the values of Canadians.