



2016 Electoral Reform Consultation Report

Submitted to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform: erre@parl.gc.ca

Organised and hosted by the Office of Frank Baylis, MP for Pierrefonds-Dollard
Held on October 13, 2016, at Dollard des Ormeaux Cultural Centre,
12001 boul. Salaberry, Dollard-des-Ormeaux QC H9B 2A7

Attendance

31 participants from the public at large.

Format

- Use of the Library of Parliament's visual presentation
- Presentation from the MP's office
- Open microphone
- Question and answer session

Subjects Discussed

Voting systems; replacement of the current voting system; voter turnout; accessibility and inclusiveness; mandatory voting; online voting; local representation.

Disclaimer: The views expressed within are those of constituents and do not in any way represent the views of the Government of Canada or any of its entities, including the office issuing this report

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Discussion Questions

What did participants say about the current system for electing Members of Parliament? Did participants feel that their votes are fairly translated?

The Town Hall presentation started with an overview of the current voting system, after which participants were asked for their feedback, including the advantages and drawbacks of the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) system of electing Members of Parliament. Participants' opinions and level of support for FPTP varied, as summarized below.

In terms of advantages of FPTP, one participant expressed that the FPTP allows for more riding representation. Specifically, the fact that electorates can elect a Member of Parliament to a single seat in a single riding helps maintain a geographic proximity between electorate and Ottawa.

The drawbacks of FPTP seemed to outweigh the benefits during the discussion. More specifically, some participants expressed that FPTP is less democratic and causes disenfranchisement than other methods of voting, as it only allows big parties to do well in election. Consequently, voters are often forced into voting strategically as opposed to voting according to their conscience or based on the party that represents their interests. Another undemocratic aspect of the FPTP stemmed from how votes transfer into seats, namely that a candidate can win with a minority of votes (under 50% of popular vote) yet hold 100% of the power. Some of the participants found this disproportionality in seats won relative to vote share received unfair, going as far as saying that their votes did not matter.

Despite acknowledging the drawbacks of the FPTP, some participants favoured keeping the status quo due to its simplicity, both to voters and in terms of the vote counting process. Furthermore, some were not even sure there is enough time to implement a big change in the voting system in time for the next election. In direct response, other participants emphasized that if we were to use "lack of time" as a hindrance to change, then we will never change our antiquated system.

Which alternatives to the current system were discussed? Did participants identify specific features that are important to them in an electoral system?

Following the discussion on FPTP, a presentation was given by the MP office on the alternative voting systems, such as Preferential/Alternative Vote, Proportional Representation (List PR), Single Transferable Vote (STV), and Mixed Member Proportional (MMP). The presentation explained how the systems work for voters, how ballots are counted, as well as their current uses in other countries.

Participants had the opportunity to comment or ask questions to the MP and his staff on each of the abovementioned systems as well as to identify features that are important to them in an electoral system.



With regards to proportional representation, many participants raised questions about the process of candidate selection under closed lists and how such a scenario would impact the geographical representation of candidates, with some fearing that the closed list PR model might generate candidates with less geographical links to voters. Many did not want to have a system whereby parties select the candidate and provide a list, preferring methods allowing for voters to have a say in the choice of candidates. These comments were also echoed when discussing the MMP model with regards to it generating two classes of Members (electoral district versus party list). To address this, some mentioned that a “Lucky Loser” system, where candidates that lost local races get placed on the party list, would make MMP more representative and proportional.

The discussion over the STV model raised concerns over the potential of such a system to lessen geographic links and regional representation, due it creating multi-member (and geographically larger) electoral districts. Similarly, another participant emphasized that any chosen electoral system should put the population ahead of the region, allocating seats based on population size to allow for more equal say across the country. It was pointed out by many of the participants in favour of changing the current system that the result and focus of this national discussion should be to end up with a system that provides more proportionality, better representation and making sure that every vote counts. After all, according to one participant, living in a diverse country means that voters have various interests, and the best way to ensure participation in the electoral process is to have a proportional system that rewards parties that cater to diverse interests.

The discussion also pointed out two important points: simplicity and legitimacy. As mentioned earlier, the FPTP (despite its drawbacks among many of the participants) is the most simple, and that is viewed as a major advantage. To address the fact that some of the alternative systems are more complex than the current one, some participants indicated that Canada should test out alternative systems for a few general elections and then analyze what worked and what did not. Drawing from the example of New Zealand which has held referendums before and after undergoing electoral reform, some of the participants felt that it would be appropriate for Canada to hold a referendum to ask Canadians what they thought of the voting system change. A referendum was viewed by some as a way for bringing legitimacy to electoral reform, though not all participants were in favor of holding a referendum.

All in all, it appeared that proponents of change in the electoral system had a preference for MMP. None of the proponents of change advocated for List PR, STV or Preferential/Alternative Vote. Importantly, they wanted to know the impact of such a change on the way Parliament and Members of Parliament work; will it bring about more cross-party cooperation and will governance be more effective?



Did participants discuss why they feel many Canadians choose not to engage in the democratic process? Did they suggest ways to encourage participation?

One of the perceived reasons for lack of participation in the democratic process is that the current voting system does not give voice to marginalized groups (such as Aboriginals and youth). Specifically, if voters do not see the value received from voting, they are less likely to vote.

The timing of elections was perceived by many to also have an impact on democratic engagement. One participant mentioned that citizens might have a greater sense of civic duty if Election Day were to be a civic holiday. Another participant expressed that if elections were held on a weekend, voter turnout might be higher, and given that many of the polling stations are in schools, this would cause less disruptions to schools' schedules. Some participants also expressed that holding the election on Monday was challenging, for both voters and elections Canada employees, as the hours were long. A weekend timeline, however, might produce higher turnout and better quality of work by election workers.

Though many of the attendees appreciated the efforts made by Elections Canada to make voting more accessible such as in advance polls, some felt that the mandate of Elections Canada could be made stronger to actively raise awareness and reach out to voters, especially now that we live in a social media world. A stronger mandate for Elections Canada could help increase civic engagement and participation in the democratic process.

Did participants feel that it should be mandatory to cast a ballot?

Mandatory voting was a popular idea to most participants, though some needed more information as to what the penalty would be for failing to vote and how this would be implemented. Even though employers are legally required to provide employees 4 hours to go vote, some employees feel guilty or at unease for taking off work. Therefore, it seemed that making voting a mandatory obligation would lessen that feeling.

Did participants discuss online voting? Did they express a desire to maintain current voting practices?

Online voting seemed to be a well-received initiative, as well as a good way to accommodate people who have limited mobility at the very least. However, the majority of participants were against changing the current voting practice, citing cyber-attacks and difficulty of conducting recounts as major drawbacks towards such a major shift. Should these questions be addressed adequately, participants would be on board with this reform.

Were any other major topics raised by the participants?

As mentioned earlier, one of the main reasons for lack of participation in the democratic process is that the current voting system does not give voice to marginalized groups (such as Aboriginals and youth). Therefore, having a system that increases participation among women and minority representation is crucial.



Referendums were seen by some participants as a way for the government to bring legitimacy to the chosen method of change. Given the simplicity of the current system, some of the participants believed that having a major change might be a “tough sell” to Canadians, who have grown to be accustomed to the current system. Despite this camp being in favour of keeping the FPTP due to its simplicity and despite its flaws, they felt that the government should consult Canadians by way of a referendum before implementing a major change. Indeed, some believed that the government should not change the system without holding a referendum first. Not everyone was in favour of the idea of referendums, citing Canada’s history on referendums as one reason and more importantly the cost of administering referendums.

Related to the need for a stronger mandate for Elections Canada, some participants emphasized the importance of having more initiatives to help increase voter accessibility for seniors and people with limited mobility. Though some of these initiatives seem to be offered by political parties or campaigns during the election, it seems more appropriate for Elections Canada to facilitate this act of civil duty.

Summary of key recommendations and comments

- FPTP increases local representation but disenfranchises minor parties.
- There may not be enough time to change the system by the next election, though this should not undermine our efforts towards progress.
- Closed list systems were generally disliked as it was felt they gave more sway to parties and unlinked local representation from governance. One preferred suggestion was to create a “Lucky Loser” variant of the MMP system, whereby the “party list” is actually drawn from defeated riding candidates.
- Reform should lead to a system that provides more proportionality, better representation and making sure that every vote counts, though simplicity and legitimacy were just as important.
- Participants felt elections should be held on a weekend or be a civic holiday.
- A referendum on electoral reform received mixed reviews, though most participants favored a referendum *after* the reform, to allow citizen to judge the results of the change.
- As an alternate system, MMP was preferred.
- Participants suggested Elections Canada be given a mandate to promote elections and voting, as well as increase its services to seniors and reduced-mobility citizens.
- Mandatory ballots were seen as a possibly positive reform, though some were skeptical of the penalties and enforcement methods.
- Holding referendums prior to changes was disliked as a rule, due to the prohibitive cost, though participants wanted to feel consulted prior to a change.

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