

MP Policy Café on Electoral Reform

Monday August 23rd

On Monday August 23rd, MP Joyce Murray hosted a policy café to give the people of Vancouver Quadra an opportunity to share their ideas on electoral reform in Canada. The event brought together almost 200 engaged members of the community. People offered a variety of ideas and expertise on what a future electoral system might look like. The room was divided into café tables of 5-7 people, who after a brief introduction by MP Murray, and a power point setting the context for the evening, had 15 minutes to discuss each of three questions. They noted key points on sticky notes which were placed on a wall for others to read. Following the group work, individuals came to the mic to share ideas, themes, and proposals, which were recorded in this report and submitted for consideration by the federal government.

The group discussed three rounds of questions:

- 1. In your opinion, what are some of the strengths and weaknesses of our current federal electoral system?*
- 2. Are there electoral systems other than our current federal electoral system that you have heard about? If so, what have you heard? Are there things that you like about these alternatives? Are there concerns you have about these alternatives?*
- 3. Are there certain groups you feel are excluded from the current electoral system? Why are they excluded? What do you think could be done to make Canada's electoral system more inclusive?*

Below are the key themes, ideas, and proposals that arose from our discussion:

1. Our Current Electoral System – First Past the Post (FPTP)

Strengths

- FPTP makes candidates accountable to both local and regional interests, and for their parties' platforms.
- FPTP generates stable majority governments.
- One representative for each riding is a fair system.
- A good safeguard is set in place through the regular election cycle.

Weaknesses

- FPTP is an unrepresentative and unfair “winner-takes-all” system; this is not truly “democratic.”

- It is unfair that one party can gain majority of the seats without having the popular vote (e.g. Liberals in the 2015 election had less than 40% of votes).
- FPTP and unranked ballots lead to strategic voting, vote splitting, and attack politics.
- Our current electoral system fosters strategic voting wherein people vote against parties they don't like instead of for the parties they like.
- Regional divisions in the country are deepened by exaggeration of the strengths and weaknesses of parties in different regions.
- The current system allows bills to pass without support from majority of voters (e.g. omnibus bills).
- Instead of one constituency representative who encompasses a broad horizon of issues, it would be beneficial to have multiple representatives specializing on different issues.

2. *Discussion about Alternative Electoral Systems*

- There is a major lack of voter participation, which could be remedied by making voting mandatory (e.g. Australia's compulsory vote, with a financial penalty for failing to vote).

Mixed Member Proportional (MMP)

Strengths

- MMP is the "best of both worlds" electoral system.
- Small constituencies allows for proportional results + local representation.
- MMP accommodates open party lists or regional lists by province.
- This system facilitates more diversity from list candidates.
- To prevent fringe parties from gaining seats, there could also be a requisite 5-8% threshold of the electorate's votes put in place.
- The MMP system currently in place in Germany represents a wide range of views and is designed to prevent undemocratic parties from gaining power.

Single Transferable Vote (STV)

Strengths

- STV promotes local representation, proportionality, and competition between multiple representatives, while limiting party influence.
- This system uses a simple ranked ballot that is easy to grasp.
- With this system, there could also be threshold in place to prevent fringe parties from gaining seats.
- The STV system in Ireland seems to be successful and long-favoured by voters.

Weaknesses

- STV relies on multi-member districts alone.
- Emphasis is on individuals and not Party platforms
- This system could prove difficult for some to understand, which will fail to improve voter participation.

Approval Voting

Strengths

- This is a fair system facilitating scoring of candidates based on different categories (i.e. personality, policies, etc.) on a 1-10 scale, then the highest average scoring candidate wins.
- Approval voting is a more comprehensive system which requires voters to learn more about who they are voting for.

Weaknesses

- This system might seem complex and difficult for some to understand, which could backfire and decrease voter participation.

Two-Round (Run-Off)

Strengths

- A two-round system, like the one currently in place in France, allows a runoff election between the top two candidates and thus better represents the majority of voters.

List Proportional Representation (PR)

Strengths

- PR is a fairer and more accurate multi-party system.
- This system better represents voters and facilitates greater diversity of voices.
- PR seems to be successful in Switzerland, where the citizens have more of a say in the passing of bills; politicians recommend the bills but voters ultimately approve them through referendum.

Weaknesses

- PR leads to coalition governments, which are ineffective.
- This system may divide the country into “interest groups” rather than promoting Canadian unity.

Alternative/Preferential Voting

Strengths

- Preferential voting takes into account voters’ second, third, fourth (etc.) choices of candidates.
- No MP is elected without support of a majority of voters.

Weaknesses

- This system isn’t really “democratic” and still facilitates a “winner-takes-all” scenario.

- Preferential voting replicates the chief flaws of FPTP, as it is not proportional and allows for a lack of diversity in parliament.

3. *Discussion about groups you feel are excluded*

Groups that are excluded, under-represented, or disengaged under our current electoral system include:

- Youth (due to lack of participation). The lack of youth voting could be (at least partially) resolved by creating an online voting system (i.e. e-voting).
- 16-17 year olds (due to voting age of 18 years)
- Immigrants and ethnocultural minorities
- Women
- Indigenous peoples
- Low-income people and the homeless
- Disabled people
- Poly-provincial residents
- Seniors
- LGBTQ community
- Environmentalists
- Geographically isolated groups, including supporters of large parties living in particular regions (e.g. Liberal supporters in the prairies)
- Western Canada within the federal government

4. *General comments*

- There is a lack of education about Canada's electoral system, leading to decreased voter participation, which could be solved by implementing civics courses in early education and making better use of the media to educate the public about the Canadian electoral system.
- Quebec's large number of seats in the House of Commons (about 25%) is disproportionately representative and unfair.
- Election promises are not being met; candidates should be required to sign a contract for commitments made that they must legally adhere to if elected.
- The electorate should be more involved in important policy decisions not simply through national consultations, but through processes such as Citizens Assembly.
- Referendum on any electoral change is important so citizens have a voice.
- Referendum a poor tool to gauge public support on complex issues like electoral reform.