

# **Submission to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform**

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HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

## **Introduction**

During the last election, our Government ran on a promise that 2015 would be the last election held through the first-past-the-post system. Earlier this year, the House of Commons Special Committee on Electoral Reform has been tasked with conducting a study into alternative voting models, with the goal of strengthening Canadian democracy. Since then, Members of Parliament from across the country have conducted consultations in their own ridings to ask for feedback and ideas.

On September 12, 2016, over 175 Oakville residents came together at Sheridan College to share their thoughts on the future of Canadian elections. Jeff Zabudsky, President and CEO of Sheridan College, moderated the evening's discussion, and Mark Holland, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Democratic Institutions, was guest speaker. Mr. Holland opened the dialogue that evening by briefly explaining five general electoral systems under consideration by the Special Committee on Electoral Reform, and thanked every participant for sharing their thoughts and concerns.

The evening was structured so that participants focused on two of six sub-topics relating to electoral reform. Participants had the choice to discuss two of the following subtopics: inclusive democracy, healthy democracy, challenges and barriers to voting, democratic principles, the relationship between MPs and citizens, or voting reforms. Within these subtopics, participants were asked to answer two questions: what are your concerns about this topic, and what are your recommendations to the Government about this topic? Following two productive roundtable sessions, participants were able to share their views with the group and ask questions of Mr. Holland.

This report is a summary of each table's conclusions, the audience feedback, and the online submissions. To see the transcribed notes from each table, go to [johnoliver.mp/electoral-reform/](http://johnoliver.mp/electoral-reform/).

## **Inclusive Democracy**

When discussing inclusive democracy, Oakville participants started by brainstorming examples of groups that often do not vote, including remote communities, youth, disabled Canadians, lower-income Canadians, and new Canadians. Homeless Canadians were also a group of concern, as many citizens do not possess proper identification to fulfill current voting requirements. Furthermore, participants are concerned that women are not adequately included in politics, due to a disproportionate amount of female to male candidates during

elections. Statistics included state that only 41% of women voted in the 2011 election, and a modestly improved 60.5% voted in 2015

Some of the recommendations that this group proposed to the Government are lowering the voting age to sixteen, improving outreach and media resources other than television to educate a wider audience (particularly youth and new Canadians) and implementing mandatory voting to ensure every voice is heard. Exploring different media outlets is important, as many Canadians do not watch Canadian television programming, choosing instead to watch international channels that do not educate on Canadian election issues. Participants included mandatory voting in this topic is because it forces politicians to address all Canadians, instead of only targeting specific groups that traditionally vote. Participants at these tables also believed that proportional representation will improve voter turnout; they believed proportional representation allows for the closest possible percentage representation to the popular vote.

## **Healthy Democracy**

In this topic, participants started off by suggesting several indicators of measuring the health of democracy. Some indicators discussed were the inclusivity of the system to all Canadians, voter turnout, accessibility to voting, tangible results in communities of election promises, and the transparency of the electoral system. Participants were concerned with spending limits during campaigns to combat corruption in government. Another major theme discussed at this table was the need for honesty after elections; that is, voters need to feel like the platforms they support are translated into policy.

Participants also shared views on their ideal democracy- participants wanted the “best and brightest” Canadians attracted to politics to make a difference in our country, where all Canadians feel as though their voices are being heard by the powerful. They also wanted to see a culture of civility in the House of Commons, where Members of Parliament are respectful to each other while debating, and parents feel comfortable taking their children to Question Period. The media was also an area of concern for participants. Honesty should be very important in the media, and participants felt that much of the current media coverage on politics is too focused on “hype” to report real stories.

This group recommended that the government should increase educational opportunities, both in schools and for the general public, about civic issues (politics/government/democracy). “Grassroots” democracy was mentioned frequently in the discussions, ensuring that policy and engagement starts from the ground up. This group’s

recommendation to address “grassroots” democracy was to increase the independence of local riding associations from political parties. Finally, in reference to the nationwide consultations on electoral reform, participants want the Government to keep Canadians informed about the process and recommendations of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform.

## **Challenges and Barriers to Voting**

Canadian geography and culture are the main factors to which participants attributed many challenges to voting in our current system. Participants believe that new Canadians may be distrustful of our electoral system due to unawareness or a lack of education. They also believed that the requirements for voter registration have become too onerous for some groups, particularly for university students that live away from home. More general challenges were that Canadians feel as though they don't have the time to pay attention to politics, and that there is a high level of cynicism towards politicians.

Barriers, on the other hand, are more obvious deterrents to voting in our current electoral system. For example, Canadians living abroad do not have representation under the current system, even though they are Canadian citizens. Being able to get to a polling station, particularly in rural ridings, as well as those with disabilities and medical restrictions, is another area of concern. Looking forward, participants were concerned that the new electoral system would have to be easy to read and understand.

This group made many recommendations, including increasing education about elections and government to immigrants, students, and the general public. They also want to see social media communications enhanced by the government. One proposition was to examine the introduction of electronic voting systems for “smaller” issues at all levels of government.

## **Democratic Principles**

The groups discussing democratic principles were asked to share their philosophical guidelines for what a new electoral system should achieve for Canadians. The most common themes were legitimacy, accessibility, and clarity. Canadians want to feel as though their vote is important, and that their values and priorities are reflected in the Government. Another aspect of legitimacy is the reflective representation of Members of Parliament – as many participants pointed out, women are 50% of the Canadian population, yet make up only 26% of the House of Commons. Indigenous peoples and other minority groups are also

underrepresented. In terms of accessibility, participants highlighted the need for elections to be easily reached by every Canadian citizen, regardless of location, language or background. Citizens should also feel as though they are able to access their representatives after elections, to share their views and perspectives on important issues. Finally, clarity would ensure that every Canadian citizen is educated on the electoral system, as well as more general education regarding politics and civic issues.

Recommendations to the government include changing the current electoral system. These participants do not believe that First-Past-the-Post is representative of most people, and is illegitimate compared to other systems currently under consideration. To ensure proper representation of Canadian females, participants suggested a mandatory 50% of elected representatives identify as female. To improve accessibility, participants suggested looking into electronic voting, as well as more advance polls. Education, an overarching theme in this report, is suggested to address improving Canadians' understanding of our electoral system. Asking candidates to provide more information about themselves during elections will also help Canadians make informed decisions when voting. These participants want Canadians to get excited about voting again, and strengthen our democracy through improving representation and integrity.

## **Relationship between MPs and Citizens**

Local representation was very important to participants, but many felt as though there is a traditionally distant relationship between Members of Parliament and those who they are elected to represent. Participants wanted more access to their MP. One proposed example was through opportunities to provide input on a local level on legislative issues in advance, similar to the JohnOliver.mp "Have Your Say" interactive tool. Town Halls are wanted by many constituents, and many participants saw this evening as a positive step to improving their relationship with their representative. Participants expressed their frustrations with "form letters" on issues about which they are passionate, and that paying taxes makes them want to be informed. Going back to local representation, participants came to consensus that no matter which system is chosen, **there must be local representation.**

Recommendations to the Government on this issue were concise, and the most significant takeaways were that MPs should focus on making the communications between constituents and MPs more transparent. MPs were also encouraged to use social media and other forms of electronic engagement to connect with constituents, who may feel disengaged from the political process as it currently stands. Many participants felt as though the distance between Ottawa and Oakville prevented constituents from seeing what their representative

was doing on their behalf, as well as back in their community. Participants also stressed the value of consultations in the community, citing the two Town Halls in the Oakville riding over the summer, and the smaller roundtable consultations on innovation and veterans' affairs.

## **Voting Reforms**

At tables examining voting reforms, participants addressed specific changes to the voting system that are being viewed by the Special Committee on Electoral Reform. These changes were mandatory voting, electronic voting, and voting for citizens abroad.

Mandatory voting had mixed reviews from participants. Reasons in favour of mandatory voting included increased participation in democracy, provides a more representative outcome in elections, an expectation would be created that citizens inform themselves thus increasing voter education, and that the act of voting would be more strongly considered a responsibility. On the other hand, issues raised regarding mandatory voting were that uninformed voters would cast ballots based on little to no opinion, results will be skewed because of these uninformed voters, and that forced votes are less meaningful than voluntary votes. One group gained consensus in favour of mandatory voting, where others had slight leanings for or against, and some were completely against the concept.

Electronic voting was seen as another vehicle for engagement, but only with strict precautions set in place to prevent fraud. With recalls to the implementation of the Phoenix pay system, participants cautioned that any online voting system would have to be properly designed and implemented, not awarded to the lowest bidder. Accountability was another important concern – the traditional paper ballot leaves a paper trail, whereas electronic voting may have error rates that democracy cannot afford. The participants decided that there must be a compromise between security and convenience when it comes to electronic voting, and again, some groups were strongly in favour, strongly against, or undecided.

Voting for citizens abroad was well-received overall, but all groups agreed that citizens abroad should not be represented if they do not pay Canadian taxes. In an increasingly globalized world, Canadian citizens may find themselves living anywhere. Allowing Canadians abroad to vote would recognize the increasingly international nature of modern business. One group voiced concerns that taxpayers living in Canada are more strongly invested in the future of the country, and that expatriates will not take voting as seriously. However, the overall sentiment between groups was that citizens of Canada, no matter where they live, should be able to participate in Canadian democracy.

## Group Discussion

After the roundtable discussions, the floor was opened to any participant wishing to share their thoughts and questions with the larger group, as well as Mark Holland. Many of the speakers for this portion of the Town Hall echoed the sentiments voiced during the roundtable discussion, but one theme was clear: Oakville wants a change to the current electoral system.

Female representation in politics was another issue that was of significant concern to participants. Participants believed that if the electoral system is changed, more women and minority groups will see representation in the House of Commons. Another common theme echoed in group discussion was that Canadians want to feel as though their vote counts. Many participants voiced their current frustrations with strategic voting and deceptive majority governments that are products of the current electoral system. Youth engagement was also a topic many participants addressed- participants believe that changing the electoral system would motivate more youth to become engaged, as youth-supported parties would improve representation through models like proportional representation.

Many more participants provided their opinions on the electoral systems currently under consideration. There was substantial support for a proportional representation system, but voices in favour of mixed-member proportional (MMP) and single transferable vote (STV) were also present. One of the main concerns with the MMP and proportional representation systems was how candidates were chosen to be on the “lists” of elected representatives – Oakville participants clearly wanted a grassroots approach to candidate selection.

Overall, **Oakville felt strongly that a referendum is unnecessary and potentially harmful for Canadian democracy**, adding that the example of the United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union as an indicator of the inefficacy of referenda.

## Conclusions

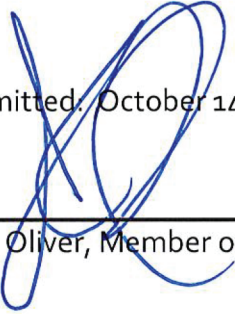
On September 12, Oakville came together to raise thoughtful, insightful concerns, and to produce educated, substantial recommendations on each subtopic to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform. From the discussion, it is clear that Oakville wants more from our democracy: more transparency during elections, more female and minority representation, more access to voting in rural and remote communities, and more reflective of Canadian voters. Oakville believes that it is worthwhile to take into consideration mandatory voting, electronic voting, and voting by Canadian expatriates.

Oakville participants indicated that they wanted to see an increase in voter engagement across the country, and they believe that the most effective way to achieve this is through civic education as early as grade 8, as well as educational resources for new Canadians and the general public. By helping Canadians understand their democracy, Canadians will be able to take part in the future of our country in an informed way.

Above all, Oakville believes that a referendum to implement a new electoral system would only prevent our country from realising a more inclusive, modern democracy reflective of the needs and wants of Canadians today. Participants ended Oakville's Town Hall on Electoral Reform on a positive note, confident that the Government was moving forward in a positive way to change Canadian democracy for the better.

Please accept the above as the riding of Oakville's submission to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform.

Submitted: October 14, 2016



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