



CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
HOUSE OF COMMONS
CANADA

Pablo Rodriguez MP for Honoré-Mercier

Public Consultations – Reform of the Canadian Electoral System

This report provides the results of three public consultations that were held on the following dates and at the following locations:

September 13, 2016
Église Jean XXIII church

September 14, 2016
Don Bosco YLC

September 17, 2016
Recreational Centre

It should also be borne in mind that some smaller meetings were held with key players and certain target groups, so they could provide their particular contributions on this topic.

Participants

Elected municipal officials, representatives of elected provincial officials, representatives of organizations and associations involved in economic development, local entrepreneurs, key community players, including representatives of organizations that provide support for seniors, youth and families, organizations responsible for providing recreational services and sports activities, as well as support in the area of social housing and, finally, citizens representing the public in general.

Questions the Participants Were Asked

What do you think about the current electoral system? What are its advantages or disadvantages, in your opinion? Do you think that the current system adequately conveys your political opinions?

A number of those present used this question as an opportunity to highlight the fact that the current voting system is simple and familiar. Despite that fact, some people expressed the feeling that their vote does not really count, and that it is always the same parties that win. According to them, citizens often feel obliged to vote “strategically” in order to prevent a “political opponent” from getting elected or re-elected. Some people said that they have to set aside their real preference and instead vote for the popular option, in order to not “waste their vote.”

Many of the participants said that they appreciated the “local or representative aspect,” meaning the fact that they can choose their own MP. They appreciate “knowing” the person who will represent them in Ottawa. Others used this point as an opportunity to speak out against the weak influence that some MPs seem to have in the policy directions taken by elected governments because of the party line, which is sometimes enforced quite strictly.

In the opinion of some, the growing presence of a number of parties over the past few years has changed the landscape in terms of electoral results. They pointed out that when there are multiple options of potentially viable candidates, the person who wins sometimes only represents a fringe of voters, which reduces their level of legitimacy.

A number of people took the opportunity to complain about the ever more frequent use of negative campaigns over the past few years. That is a practice that makes them cynical. The obvious energy that some parties use to cater only to their “base” has accentuated this, and has given rise to debates that are ever more “divisive” (the use of “wedge issues”).

Ultimately, even though the current plurality-majority system is simple and well understood, according to some participants that encourages a cynical attitude about politics, since elected representatives and governments only win by a small margin.

Others think that it would be necessary to show that the current system needs to be changed. They are comfortable with the status quo and have little confidence in this initiative, which they see as a possible attempt to change people’s minds about such an important issue for our democracy.

What do you think about the other options that could be implemented in Canada following these consultations?

In general, the participants were not very familiar with the options. Obviously, they had already heard the terms “proportional,” “preferential,” “mixed,” “first past the post” and “two-ballot system,” but they generally had a hard time explaining how they operate or the principles behind them.

The participants again spoke extensively about their questions concerning the relevance and authentic nature of this initiative. The vast majority do not feel that they have been adequately informed about the possible options, and even less about the reasons why they should opt for any particular method.

For example, a number of people believed that the proportional method is intended to allow small parties to get some seats, but the participants did not know how that would translate into the distribution of seats, since there is currently just one seat per electoral district. Some of them wondered whether that system would mean the end of local elected representatives, or if it would mean that they would then have to vote solely for a political party and the candidates would no longer be voted for by direct suffrage.

When the main options were presented, the participants were confused and expressed various opinions concerning the potential benefits of the systems that were presented (preferential and proportionate representation based on regional lists, etc.).

One preference did, however, become clear from the discussions. The participants said that they wanted the system to remain simple and they hoped that the system would be more representative of the choices of voters. They appreciated not feeling “compelled” to vote “AGAINST” a party, but rather to vote “FOR” a group of ideas or a candidate whom they like.

In your opinion, what should the primary goal of the reform of the voting system be?

The participants emphasized that the priority should be **to provide better representation of the opinion of citizens and to be more representative**. A new voting system should remain **easy to understand and easy to explain**. The consensus was that the **local and personal aspect should be maintained**.

Citizens were divided on the increased likelihood of the creation of coalition or minority governments under the proportional system. Some people were concerned because that would result in more frequent elections and additional costs. Others were concerned about the power that more radical parties could acquire, and that they would then control the balance of power. The thing that people appreciated about the proportional systems is that they would result in requiring governments to listen to the general public more closely, or at least listen to the ideas of the other parties.

Apart from the change in the voting system, what means could encourage citizens to participate more actively in political matters? In particular, this might mean the rate of participation in elections, which is generally quite low, and even anaemic in the case by-elections.

In light of the responses provided by the participants, it is clear that they feel uneasy about the way politics is being run at the present time. The people who responded said that they are disillusioned with the current politicians. They have the impression that politicians are using vote-catching methods more and more often, and this situation does not encourage them to vote for anyone.

Others spoke about the rather uninspiring aspect of a number of campaigns, which are often too neutral or in which there is no debate on ideas, with discussions that are too often replaced by arguments that are targeted towards a specific clientele.

In the opinion of the participants, candidates and the various political parties should be engaged in inspiring politics, stop dividing citizens on issues that are negative and unconstructive, and make sure that they propose specific programs that are addressed to everyone and not just to target groups. In this regard, some people emphasized that their cynicism is related to the game of politics more than to the voting system.

One participant suggested using the American system as a model and requiring people to “declare” their party affiliation in order to have the right to vote. In his opinion, that could encourage people to find out at least the basics of what is really being proposed by the party for which they are a “sympathizer.”

Another issue raised concerning the American system is the length of the campaigns, which gives candidates and party leaders a lot more time to meet with voters so they can make themselves known and explain their platforms. This is an aspect that contributes to ensuring that voters are able to make more informed decisions.

Should mandatory voting be considered?

Some people took the opportunity to say that, in their opinion, not voting is a way of protesting against the current system, which “forces” them to always vote along the same political fault lines. In this context, the idea of making voting mandatory would add to the already prevailing cynicism. One participant

pointed out that people who do not wish to vote will simply “cancel their vote” and that this would not reflect the actual objective behind making voting mandatory.

For other participants, abstaining from voting is not a form of protest against the current system, but a way of expressing their dissatisfaction with the choices that are currently available to them (the local candidates or the political parties).

It was also pointed out that mandatory voting could lead to situations that are detrimental for certain segments of the population. For example, they were thinking about people with reduced mobility or the elderly, who could potentially be made subject to some penalty if they are unable to go to vote. That would be an injustice.

Would electronic voting be a viable option for encouraging you to vote?

People were favourable to the idea of voting remotely. The participants highlighted the problems of public transport in the Metropolitan East part of the city. According to them, that is a barrier to participation for the elderly or people with reduced mobility who are at home, or for people on low incomes who do not have an automobile. Other people pointed out that for families in which both the parents are working, the logistics of voting in the evening can be difficult.

While all the participants found the idea to be potentially interesting, a number of them were wary about the risks of possible “diversion” of the information, both in terms of the safety of the data and voting manipulation. In particular, people highlighted the vulnerability of the elderly to diversion of their vote.

If the government were to go ahead with this new type of system, the participants expressed the fear of being “obliged” to vote electronically and that physical voting offices would not be set up and even disappear completely. Ultimately, some people feared that that could accentuate the problems currently being experienced by those who do not have access to a vehicle or to adequate public transit.

Conclusions

One point that was raised over and over again was that such a reform cannot be undertaken in a context where the public does not have a knowledge and understanding of the issues involved and of the impact over the medium and long terms. First and foremost, it would be necessary to have a transparent process that would allow citizens to make an informed decision. The necessary time should also be taken, given the wide scope of this issue and the impact that a reform would have, regardless of the chosen option.

In short, even though there was some dissatisfaction with the current system, the vast majority of the participants said that they were not convinced that it should be changed. They said that they do not really believe that the potential alternatives would be any better.

One major aspect for the participants is the fact that they do not want a decision to be imposed on them by a political minority. It is necessary to make sure that any major reform is legitimate.

Highlights: Results of the Votes

During the consultations, we asked the participants to vote by a show of hands on certain issues. The results are as follows.

The abstentions reflect the position of those who considered that they did not have the necessary information and understanding of all aspects of the proposals to make a decision either “for” or “against.”

Should this debate be started?

For: 10%	Against: 6.66%	Abstained: 83.33%
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Should the current system be changed?

For: 19.1%	Against: 9.5%	Abstained: 71.4%
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Are you in favour of mandatory voting?

For: 20%	Against: 15%	Abstained: 65%
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