

Hamilton West-Ancaster-Dundas Electoral Reform Town Hall Submission:

Type of event: Town Hall

Date: Tuesday August 23rd 2016.

Location: McMaster Innovation Park (175 Longwood Road South #105)

Hosted By: Filomena Tassi (Moderator: Dr. Henry Jacek)

Number of Attendees: 100

Summary of Event:

The evening was constructed in a standard town hall format with a few minor adjustments. In order to better facilitate dialogue, four professors with expertise on the topic of electoral reform were invited to each make a brief presentation before opening up conversation to the general public. Participants were informed beforehand that there were four discussion questions on the agenda.

- What are the current strengths and weaknesses of our current first past the post electoral system?
- Are there other electoral systems that are preferable to our current system? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these systems?
- Should we implement mandatory voting?
- Should we implement electronic voting?

Discussion Questions:

What are the current strengths and weaknesses of our current first past the post electoral system?

A few speakers spoke on the strengths surrounding the current first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system. Speakers commented on the stable democracy that we have in Canada, and pointed to this stability as a reflection of the electoral system he have in place. Another popular argument stated that while FPTP does not provide a perfect democracy, each system has benefits and drawbacks. The ability for FPTP to more frequently lead to majority governments was illustrated as a strength of the system, as majority governments can push through their legislative agenda more easily.

Far outweighing the speakers outlining the benefits of the FPTP system, many people were critical of the current electoral system. The most frequent complaint about FPTP highlights its inability to reflect the true will of the majority amongst Canadian voters. The system does not produce majority governments that reflect the majority of Canadians. As one speaker suggested, typically about 39.5% of the total vote share is enough for a party to win a majority in the House of Commons. With multiple candidates running in ridings across the country, we very rarely see a candidate receive 50% support or greater of the total vote share, let alone the government. This contributes to the “false majority” problem frequently associated with FPTP. These majority governments have a much easier time pushing through legislation that as many as 2/3rds of Canadians may not support. Other speakers commented on the system as one that is antiquated and sparingly used by other nations.

Are there other electoral systems that are preferable to our current system? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these systems?

The majority of speakers spoke on a number of potential traits that would be important to consider if we were to update our current voting system. While there was no consensus reached on which system that would be, the most popular electoral system highlighted involved proportional representation.

Electoral systems that produce minority coalition governments when less than 50% of the vote share is attained was outlined by a number of speakers as a preferable alternative as it leads to greater representation in government and a check on the power of the elected government.

Proportional systems where you vote for a local candidate that represents a particular riding as well as for a political party based off a public list of candidates ensures greater representation than the FPTP system. There are many varieties of these systems, with plenty of global examples to pull from. This will be important as we can structure a system that best suits the uniqueness of Canada. Once again, eliminating the “false majority” issue from our electoral system was repeatedly highlighted as an important quality of any newly adopted system.

A few speakers commented on the complexity of the process of electoral reform. There are a number of unique systems that will need to be considered in order to address our particular needs. No system is perfect, so it is critical to establish the defining principles of democracy we would like to see reflected within our electoral system. Using the five defining principles within the mandate of the committee as a guide (effectiveness and legitimacy, engagement, accessibility and inclusiveness, integrity, and local representation) we need to thoughtfully deliberate the balance of these principles to determine what democratic principles should carry more weight in the next system that is selected. This in itself is extremely complex and will require a significant amount of time. Some speakers expressed concern that the electoral reform process will not receive the thoughtful deliberation that is necessary and will be rushed.

Should we implement mandatory voting?

Although almost everyone during the discussion agreed that we must do more to improve voter turnout, implementing mandatory voting was not seen as an appropriate response. A number of issues were raised with mandatory voting. Many speakers were concerned that it would not address the problem of voter disengagement from the electoral process. The most common line of argument suggested this would most likely lead to uninformed votes, as well as open up the potential for protest votes and fringe party votes.

A number of alternative solutions to mandatory voting were suggested. The most popular solution involved increasing electoral education in high schools, actively educating youth in civic studies. Pairing a stronger educational program, with a younger voting age, may also help to increase voter turnout, installing a strong civic duty at a young age. Incentivizing voters, potentially through financial reimbursement, was another proposal. Most speakers stressed that incentives could be effective means to increase voter turnout, however there should not be a penalty imposed on those who do not vote as this may infringe on individual rights. The general conclusion of many speakers was that fixing our current voting system, and engaging voters earlier in life and more actively was a far better solution than using mandatory voting as a stop-gap measure to fix the problem.

Should we implement electronic voting?

The overall consensus of the majority of speakers was to avoid electronic voting. Almost all speakers were concerned about the security risks surrounding a move to electronic voting. The ability to verify electronic votes would be difficult, if not impossible, and opens up the threat of potential voting fraud. A few speakers highlighted the issues linked to voter fraud in previous United States elections using voting machines that have been proven quite easy to manipulate. The speed of electronic voting seems to sacrifice accuracy.

Some speakers argued that many of us have transitioned to online banking, and if we can trust our money being sent electronically there is no reason why we should not consider sending our vote online as well. However, many speakers followed up this argument by suggesting that our democracy is irreplaceable, and while a bank can attempt to correct financial fraud, it would be impossible to replace our democracy if it is corrupted through voter fraud.

Key Recommendations:

- 1) The committee should consider replacing the current First-Past-the-Post electoral system
- 2) The committee should consider implementing a system of proportional representation
- 3) The committee should not implement mandatory voting
- 4) The committee should consider lowering the voting age and increasing educational awareness through more in-depth civic studies programs
- 5) The committee should not implement electronic voting

Thank you for your consideration.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Filomena Tassi'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a period at the end.

Filomena Tassi