

# **REPORT ON ELECTORAL REFORM INPUT FOR SARNIA-LAMBTON**

**Marilyn Gladu**  
**Member of Parliament, Sarnia-Lambton**  
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## Executive Summary

Through the 5 Town Hall meetings, mail-outs to 45,000 homes of electoral reform householders requesting input, and data tracking of all emails, calls and letters received on the electoral reform topic, responses from less than 900 of the 110,000 voters were received. Based on this information alone, the conclusion can be drawn that either none of these methods adequately gathers input from constituents, or that constituents are not that interested in electoral reform.

From the 172 who attended the multiple Town Halls, several themes emerged. There were a majority who expressed satisfaction with the existing system and questioned the need for change. The second most frequently expressed preference was for a form of proportional voting, with many embracing the idea of voting for a local candidate and, in a second ballot, for a party or prime minister. The majority believed the preferred ranked ballot system was too complex to be well executed in a short space of time, and many constituents cited studies that show this system to be less effective than the other two mentioned.

The majority did not support mandatory voting, although there was an average of 10% who were in favor of it. On the subject of on-line voting, most constituents were concerned about having safeguards to prevent tampering with the votes, to ensure that individuals were really voting their vote, and to protect the privacy of the vote. There was a lack of confidence in the government's ability to prevent their computer systems from being hacked, based on previous breaches. That said, all agreed on-line voting would be important in increasing the number of younger people voting.

Another recurring theme was the need for education about Canada's electoral process in the school systems from primary grades upward. Currently, a grade 10 civics course is required, and this was seen as an improvement over a generation of Canadians who have not received instruction and are in need of additional education on electoral reform for an informed vote to occur.

Consistently, the message was brought by the majority at each meeting that if a change to the electoral system is proposed, it needs to go to Canadians in a referendum for decision. Concern was expressed that the wording of the question and the understanding by Canadians of the system, or options proposed, would be critically important.

Finally, there was an agreement by all that it is more important when considering electoral reform to do it right than to do it quickly. Everyone agreed that the current timeline proposed is rushing the process.

# Data Gathering Methodology

In order to include as many Sarnia-Lambton constituents as possible, from as many regions of the riding as possible, the decision was made to hold a total of 5 Town Halls across the riding. These Town Halls were scheduled from 6:30 p.m. until 8:30 p.m. on various weeknights, avoiding Monday and Friday nights to encourage attendance. Venues were chosen based on both their location as well as their accessibility. All 5 of the Town Hall locations were fully accessible. Efforts were also made to include a visual presentation and, when possible, a microphone and speaker system to facilitate communication during the Town Halls. Locations for the Town Halls were spaced throughout the riding so as not to favour one area over another – the largest of the venues was in the most densely populated area of Sarnia. Community centers and Legions were chosen due to their familiarity in the area.

Prior to the announcement of the Town Halls, the topic of electoral reform was included in the seasonal householder which was distributed across the riding. The householder received a rather positive response, the majority of responders calling for no change to the current electoral system, for proportional representation and, above all, the need for a referendum before any changes are made. There were very few responses against a national referendum.

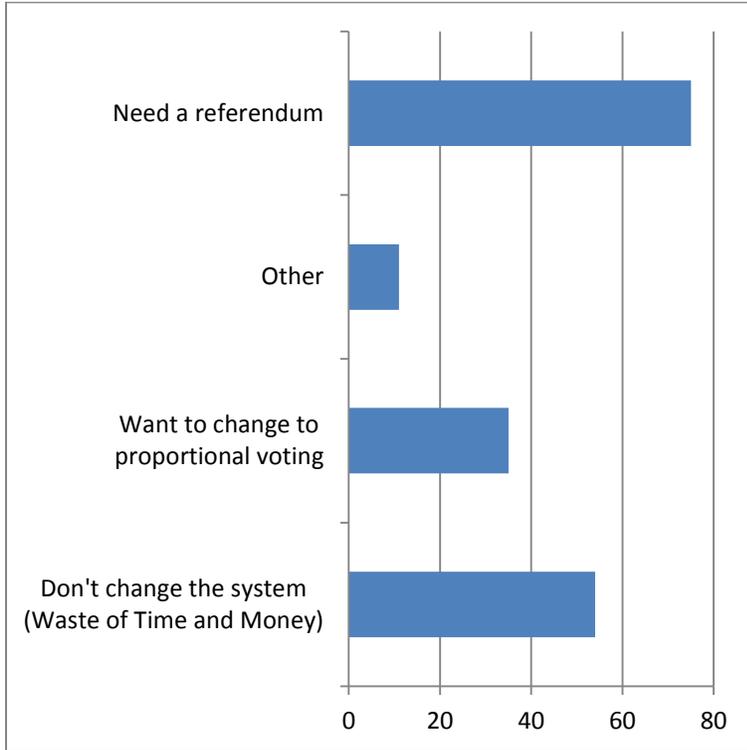
Advertising for the Town Halls was done in all of the local papers, the local radio station, social media and by email for the constituents in our database who had provided them.

The forum for the Town Halls was a standard presentation provided by the Minister of Democratic Reform, followed by questions and clarifications regarding the presentation and an opportunity for all attendees to express their views on electoral reform. Their comments were recorded and are presented in Appendix 1. Information regarding the Special Committee, how to get additional information or submit to the committee, to the Minister, to the MP or to the Prime Minister was provided.

In order to ensure that constituents were from the Sarnia-Lambton riding, proof of address was requested. A sign in sheet and verification process was used. No one was refused entry to any Town Hall.

# Input from Mail-outs, Calls, Emails and Letters

From the 172 responses received, the views expressed were:



Many respondents reinforced that Canada has successfully used this system for 150 years, and that there are more important issues (like job creation) that government should be focused on.

# Town Halls

Wyoming, August 30<sup>th</sup>

The first of the Town Halls went very smoothly. The 23 citizens of Wyoming that came out were very polite and very courteous, letting everyone speak regardless of their political beliefs. The conversation was very open and rather informal with constituents speaking from their seats around the hall. Some questions of clarification were asked during the presentation by the MP, such as defining the different systems and listing other electoral reform referendums that have been held in the past on a provincial level. Other questions of clarification centered on voter turnout in recent years as well as the economic changes that a change of electoral system could create.

General discussion topics brought up by constituents included concerns with the current electoral system. It was brought up by several constituents that the **first past the post** system is flawed in that your vote for your local MP is often based on their party. The question was then raised on whether or not Canadians vote for their MPs based on their qualities as representatives of the region or based solely on the Party affiliation, or whether it's a combination of the two. This brought on discussion as to why our current system does not allow us to vote for our local member and the Prime Minister separately, which is not possible under our current system. Many believed that the electoral system should stay as it is because it is understood across the country, and changing the system would be complicated and costly.

There were both very positive and negative comments on the subject of **proportional representation**. On a positive note, it was brought up that proportional representation can provide a mirror effect of election results into the House of Commons, assuring simple representation in the lower Chamber. On a negative note, proportional representation is an often unstable form of government where the legislative process can be severely slowed down. The creation of coalitions can also lead to unstable and often changing governments. A constituent was concerned as to whether or not proportional representation would lead to a larger number of elections, because of votes of non-confidence and dissolutions, therefore, costing more. The complexity of a proportional system was also discussed and the need for better education, especially for youth, was highlighted.

There was very little discussion on the **ranked ballot** system. Many constituents had concerns about its complexity and its likelihood to always have the same outcome. Many were concerned that the education curve on the system would take many years.

The group at this Town Hall mostly leaned toward the need for a **referendum**. Many believed that a small number of people, even though they are elected, should not have complete power over a country's fundamental democratic process. Another option presented was that a referendum should not be a simple yes or no question, but a choice from a list of voting options; this was then viewed as being too complicated and would probably not end in a majority result. Another view was that the special committee on the subject should make a simple, single electoral system recommendation and that a referendum be based solely on that, or that education classes be required before referendum voting. The main concern with a referendum became the lack of education for Canadians and, therefore, the possibly misinformed votes and skewed results. A referendum might also oversimplify such a complicated situation. It was also brought up that maybe MPs should have the final vote on electoral reform since they do represent all of Canada more directly than strictly the Cabinet; however, concerns were raised over whether or not MPs would vote for their riding or for their Party on the matter. Also, maybe if voting by referendum were more familiar to Canadians, the idea of it would be less daunting.

The subject of **mandatory voting** was brought forward by the MP and was met with more questions than answers when the group was not comfortable voicing their final opinions on the subject in a yes or no fashion. Suggestions were made by constituents on the subject. One constituent suggested that, if mandatory voting were forced, that constituents not be fined for not participating, but that those who participated in the voting process be given a tax credit. This would, therefore, not penalize those who abstain, but would encourage those who participate in a positive manner. This brought of the question of whether or not those who do not vote should have a say in politics or not and whether the MP represents the whole riding or just the voters of the riding. Both sides of that question were debated.

There was very little input on the subject of **online voting**. The principal points centered on the safety concerns of constituents and the fear of the manipulation of results. Overall, online voting was viewed rather negatively; however it would increase voter "turnout" participation due to its ease of access.

As previously mentioned, electoral and voter **education** became a recurring theme in this Town Hall. Many constituents were concerned for the future as many viewed future generations as uninformed or simply ignorant of politics and, therefore, of elections. Increasing understanding of political information in youth, possibly through schooling, was thought to be a way to better to improve voter turnout, regardless of whether or not electoral reform happens.

When asked about how the government can encourage participation, the resounding answer was that many people did not believe that their vote really matters because they are only one person among many. As such, constituents feel like they have no real power and often don't see the sense in participating in elections. It was also brought up, by a young girl under the voting age, that children not being introduced to elections earlier only discourage youth participation when they come of age. Many young voters are also cynical and ignorant of political parties due to the exclusions of smaller political parties who interest them more directly. It was brought up that if a voter adhered to a specific small party, and knew that party had no chance at a seat, the voter would simply abstain from voting. As such,

it was encouraged that the federal government be composed of more small, diverse parties. Many believed that even if no changes are made to the current system, at least these consultations will engage Canadians on the subject and hopefully have an impact on voter knowledge and turnout.

The concept of child suffrage was presented by a constituent who brought forward the idea that children should also be allowed to vote. The main argument to this being that children are able to drive a car, have a job, etc. at 16, yet, they cannot vote until they turn 18. He stated that decreasing the minimum age for voting would increase voter participation and, in turn, educate children on the subject at an earlier age.

It was also brought up that every electoral system is specific to its country and that, if changes are made, Canada would need to create and tailor a system to its needs. It's not as simple as transplanting a system – Canada would need to make its own, and it was discussed that this would be a time consuming and costly process. Another concern would be the cost of reform in general and whether or not reform would create more MP positions, therefore, costing more.

## Mooretown, September 1<sup>st</sup>

This Town Hall went very well. The 19 constituents who attended the Town Hall were quite informed on all the issues surrounding electoral reform; this led to much more in depth conversations throughout the night. A total of 19 people signed in; however, a reporter joined the session a short time later, rounding the number to 20. This number did not include the MP or her staff. In general, this Town Hall tended to lean in favour of keeping the **first past the post** system, but that was not unanimous (there was one in favor of proportional voting). However, the decision to make any changes pass through a referendum was almost unanimous, with only one individual not believing a referendum to be necessary. It was brought forward that, even if you vote for a member or party who loses, your vote is not wasted. A more popular opinion simply won out. The elected member will still represent all of the constituents in the region, regardless of who voted for the member, and members are held accountable to that. Since many felt that votes were not wasted in the current system, many believed that no change to the electoral system is needed.

A question that was brought up was whether or not these Town Hall consultations will really matter. Many constituents believed that, at the end of the day, the Liberal cabinet will make the final decision regardless of any input from exterior sources, especially Conservative ridings.

This Town Hall also discussed some of the logistics to changing the electoral system. The returning Elections Canada officer was present and, with his knowledge of the current electoral system, a detailed discussion was had on the feasibility of new electoral systems. The largest concern was tabulation time and, in turn, how long it would take to translate votes into seats. Along the same lines it was asked that,

if tabulating the vote by, for example, ranked ballot would take weeks or months, would there be a government in power during that time or would all country politics simply pause. The returning officer brought further insight into how other jurisdictions run their elections, such as Oregon who do mail-in ballots. This was not an overall popular idea among the constituents, but further perspective did add depth to the discussion.

An already recurring concern about the **proportion representation** system is that proportional systems often seem to lead to minority governments. This could lead to instability in government and, possibly, more elections. However, a couple of people were fast to point out that proportional would be a fair system to statistically represent Canadians. Proportional would also open the possibility to include many smaller parties to participate in federal government. This in turn might encourage more voters, mainly youth, to feel like their votes would really count. As such, it was proposed that proportional representation might boost voter participation and turnout, especially among younger voters. One constituent at this Town Hall believes that proportional representation is the best option and that a referendum is not necessary to make this choice.

There were also many concerns regarding **ranked voting**. The primary concerns raised were focused on the details pertaining to the actual lists of candidates that would be presented to voters at the poll. It was suggested that, if these lists were party lists instead of local candidates, the list would need to meet a certain criteria to ensure representation of all, including region, language, demographic, race, etc. This would assure that, although the lists would be made by the party, diversity and clear representation would still be present.

It was also discussed as to whether or not this would amount to a constitutional change. The MP clarified it would not be a constitutional change but bylaws would need to be updated. Many also believe that the timeline set out by the Liberals is much too aggressive to adequately complete such a thorough consultation process. Most if not all believed that, if electoral reform were to happen, it would need to be done right regardless of the length of time it takes, instead of doing it quickly but not necessarily right.

**Online voting** became a major concern to many constituents due to security issues. As one constituent mentioned, what would stop people from voting for their whole household (they would have all the personal information such as a SIN number) or people selling their votes as they would not be as closely monitored. Constituents were also concerned about fraudulent voting and internet hacking, etc. Constituents were especially concerned if online voting would result in the closing of some, or all, physical polling stations. Online voting also alienates seniors, those with disabilities, and those with no or with unreliable internet access, such as rural communities. It was noted, however, that online voting would be the best way to engage younger voters and that, eventually, online voting will become normalized. It just needs to be done securely.

16 constituents voted in favor of a **referendum**, while 1 did not. The remaining 3 were either unsure or uncomfortable answering. That said, there was a very strong response in regards to whether or not a

referendum is necessary for any electoral changes. The majority believed that Canadians deserve a say in any electoral changes, yet the one constituent against a referendum believed that elected officials are the most qualified to make the decision, and that a national referendum would further complicate the issue and slow down the process. She believed that the sooner the electoral system is fixed the better.

**Mandatory voting** also brought with it some different opinions. Most of the constituents were concerned with the penalties that could be associated with mandatory voting. The MP assured that, similar to the mandatory Census situation, it might be heavily enforced but not necessarily punishable. Concern was also raised that individuals might vote simply as a chore without being informed, or intentionally spoil their ballots in protest to throw the results. This returned to the subject of education and teaching youth the importance of voting, and possibly offering incentives for voters – tax credits, stickers similar to blood donation, etc. The closing remark by a constituent, and supported by many, not all, was that one individual does not have the right to change a country's central democratic system without being held accountable to its population.

Similar to the first Town Hall, **education** became a primary discussion theme. Many believed that 2-3 years, for example, until the next federal election, would not be enough time to properly educate Canadians on the workings of a new electoral system. Although Elections Canada is there to facilitate whatever decision is made by the government, there would be a number of downstream challenges that would go along with any changes. There were also many concerns as to whether or not any changes made would affect electoral boundaries and where Canadians are used to voting. We were assured by the returning officer that, currently, ridings are only redrawn due to significant changes in Census data. Many were worried that a new system would be too complicated and it would deter voters; however, another constituent believes that the public can be easily educated and that it is patronizing to say otherwise. It was proposed that, instead of spending money on electoral reform, it should be spent on electoral education.

## Petrolia, September 6<sup>th</sup>

There were 20 individuals who attended this Town Hall – 90 percent of those attending were in favor of keeping the current system. The other 10 percent were in favor of proportional voting. 80 percent of these constituents wanted to have a referendum on any new system proposed. There was not much support for mandatory voting, and similar concerns on the safeguarding and security for online voting were heard.

## Camlachie, September 7<sup>th</sup>

Of the 15 in attendance, 20 % were looking for a change in the electoral system. Although they had not settled on a choice of alternative, most preferred the Mixed Member Proportional model. One of the

constituents is holding education sessions for individuals that want to learn about electoral reform. The reason they don't like the First Past the Post System is that 18 times out of the last 22 elections, it has produced a majority government that got less than 39 % of the vote ( which, with voter turnout could be less than a third of Canadians). For the rest, they did not think we should change the system, and felt that all of the choices and possible details of execution were too complicated for people to absorb and vote in an informed way on. There was recognition that online voting would increase participation among the youth, but the concern about privacy protection and safeguarding against voter rigging was heard again. There was not much support for mandatory voting (only one person agreed with it). The discussion regarding a referendum was that if the question posed is too complicated, then people will vote against it to keep the status quo. Most people wanted a referendum once a preferred system was identified, but wording of the question would be important (reference to the convoluted Quebec separation referendum was made). The subject of the importance of education of the youth on our electoral system and their duty to vote was discussed.

Again, the importance of implementing any change correctly instead of quickly was emphasized by several attendees (and example provided was that New Zealand took 10 years to transition to their new system).

## Sarnia, September 8<sup>th</sup>

There were 39 people in attendance at the event at the Royal Canadian legion. Of those in attendance, the discussion matched reasonably well with what had been heard at previous town halls. Many people did not believe the current system was an issue. Those who were not in favor of the FPTP current system seemed to favor proportional representation. There was support to vote for a local candidate instead a party ranked list, and residents were open to voting two ballots- one for a local candidate, and one for a party or Prime Minister.

This group had the highest support (40 %) for mandatory voting, but expressed concern about how to safeguard on-line voting. There was some agreement that on-line voting should be implemented, but concern about hackers, privacy and vote rigging.

One individual recommended the direct representation system that was studied in the UK, but was not implemented. Again, the need for better education from a young age and for the electorate was emphasized. Discussion regarding how to improve voter turnout centered around voter apathy due to supporting parties that will not get elected or have much seat representation, like the Green Party.

In addition, there was consensus that when changing the system, the government should not rush, but should ensure a plan with well thought out execution detail exists. The majority wanted whatever system is recommended to be voted on by Canadians in a referendum.

## Conclusions & Recommendations

The Town Hall meetings were well received both by those that attended, as well as the media. Although the turnout and response rate for all venues of input was low, it was an opportunity to raise awareness of the topic and its importance. As a result of the input, the constituents of Sarnia-Lambton recommend:

1. That the government, in their study and implementation of any change to electoral reform, take time to do it right rather than do it quickly.
2. That if the government chooses to change the electoral process, that they consult with Canadians by referendum.
3. That the government keep the existing system (FPTP most popular) or consider proportional voting (second choice).
4. That if the government changes the electoral system they maintain the ability to vote for a local candidate and add an additional vote for a party or prime minister.
5. That the government not introduce mandatory voting.
6. That the government explore safeguards to ensure online voting integrity and privacy are protected, and consult with Canadians on any proposed implementation.
7. That if the government chooses to change the electoral process, that education for all Canadians to understand how to vote and the implications of the vote is provided.

## Appendix 1 – Personal Comments

Idea on recall voting – one constituent suggested that once a government is elected that on the second year of their term, a voting ballot on whether to keep the party in or not is included with your income tax. If the majority vote against 51%, an election would be called.

One constituent suggested children should be allowed to vote. They believed child suffrage is present in our society and engaging young voters would help boost voter turnout and educated Canadians at a younger age.

Many constituents agreed that the early polling stations in the 2015 election facilitated voting for many Canadians and several constituents viewed early polling as a reason for increased voter turnout.

Across all town halls the majority of those attending agreed that more needs to be done to educate youth on elections and political systems. It was often brought up that doing so would increase public awareness during elections and in turn increase voter turnout.

The majority of the constituents present agreed that a referendum is necessary before any changes are made to the Canadian electoral system. A couple constituents believed that there was no need for a referendum, stating that elected officials are qualified to make the decision and that this decision needed to be made as soon as possible.

A constituent suggested that, if voting were to become mandatory, an incentive be giving to those who vote instead of a penalty to those who do not vote. They believe it would make voting a more positive and encouraging experience.

Although many understood online voting as an eventual change, the majority of constituents were very concerned with the security around that method of voting. One constituent remarked that one individual could easily vote for their entire household with or without every individual's permission. It was however agreed upon that online voting would increase voter turnout, however many were

concerned it might increase it fraudulently. Many were also concerned that online voting would reduce the number of polling stations and isolate rural and aging demographics.

A constituent was very concerned Canada might lose the local representative focus that has been present since Confederation. If Canada loses the local representation aspect, the constituent was curious who they would go to for help and if that help would now require internet or telephone communication due to distance.

Many constituents raised the question as to what would happen if a voter where to not rank every candidate on a ranked ballot. It was discussed that that ballot might be considered incomplete and therefore not count. This raised a lot of concern about vote manipulation and freedom of vote. One constituent asked if that would go against the Constitution.