



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

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About us: Leadnow is a non-profit, independent advocacy organization founded in 2011. We have a small staff team based in Toronto and Vancouver and many volunteers located in every province. We engage people across Canada online and offline on a variety of issues, and we want to build an open democracy, a fair economy, and a safe climate for all generations. We are also a member of the Every Voter Counts Alliance, a diverse set of groups calling for proportional representation for Canada.

Thousands of members of Leadnow provided the input that went into this brief, and we want to acknowledge and thank the entire Leadnow community for their passion for improving democracy.



Summary

Leadnow is a non-profit, independent advocacy community made up of hundreds of thousands of people from across the country. Canada is one of the last countries in the OECD still using a first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system. The Leadnow community is deeply frustrated by how FPTP wastes votes, creates false majority governments, underrepresents women and people of colour and makes our politics more adversarial. We believe these issues would be best addressed by our broken FPTP electoral system with a proportional representation (PR) electoral system. Only proportional representation will give Canada a more fair, inclusive, and collaborative system of government.

Leadnow and Electoral Reform

Electoral reform and a desire to improve Canadian democracy are baked into Leadnow's DNA. We are a non-profit, independent advocacy organization founded in 2011 to bring people together across party lines for progress on the major challenges of our time. Over the years we have built a community that includes hundreds of thousands of people from coast to coast to coast. This community comes from every province and territory and represents a wide variety of political affiliations, ages and backgrounds. What unites us is that we care about the future of this country, and we want to see a clean environment, a fair economy, and an open democracy.

Our community believes that Canada's FPTP electoral system is outdated, unfair and unjust. We believe that everyone's vote ought to count and that people should be able to vote for their first choice, every time, without fear of accidentally electing their least favoured candidate. **We believe it is fundamentally undemocratic for anyone's vote to be wasted, and it should be impossible for any party to win 100% of the power with only 39% of the popular vote.**

In the last federal election Leadnow conducted a strategic voting campaign. We spent hours talking to Canadians in ridings across the country who were deeply frustrated by what they felt as a lack of true choice offered by FPTP. Some lived in ridings that swung between two parties, but they wanted to vote for a third party and worried about 'splitting the vote'. Others lived in ridings which were considered 'safe' for one party, and thus questioned the point of voting at all. We heard from voters who had voted their entire lives and had never had their votes count. **And we heard a common theme through all of it: our electoral system has to change.**

Canadians have a lot of experience with voting strategically due to FPTP. In the thousands of hours we spent going door to door, Leadnow staff and volunteers did not encounter many people who didn't understand the fundamental problems with FPTP. But one of the things that made strategic voting tolerable for voters was the idea that it could be the last time they'd ever have to do it, because for the first time ever, in 2015 three political parties made promises to change it.

The last few months have been a unique and once-in-a-generation opportunity to have a real conversation about electoral reform in this country - something that is long overdue, especially given that Canada is one of the last western countries still using FPTP and **the only OECD country that uses FPTP exclusively at every level of government.**^{1 2}

¹ List of 45 countries still using FPTP (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance):
<http://www.idea.int/esd/type.cfm?electoralSystem=FPTP>

² Of OECD countries, Canada, the UK and the United States are the only ones without proportional representation. The UK and United States use runoff ballots at the local level in various jurisdictions.

So in March 2016, we asked our community about what they would like to see instead of FPTP. 70% voted in favour of proportional representation. We surveyed them again in late August 2016. Over 7700 people completed the survey over the course of two days on August 23rd and 24th, 2016. **The biggest takeaway is that 85% chose proportional representation (PR) as their preferred electoral system (the other options being first-past-the-post and Alternative Vote).** In the next section we'll explain why.

Why proportional representation (PR)?

The Leadnow community supports PR for the following reasons:

1. **It's more fair.** Where FPTP distorts the will of the electorate, PR gets us much closer to representing what voters really want. Not only does it give us a government that is more representative of the political beliefs and values of the entire country, but it also ensures that people's votes are not wasted. In the last election, over 9 million votes went to candidates that did not win.³ Whether you're an NDP voter in rural Manitoba or a Conservative voter in downtown Toronto, you deserve to have your voice heard.

As a Leadnow member from Cambridge, Ontario put it:

"FPTP voting was only appropriate when we had two large parties competing. Now with new and smaller parties trying to get in there, it's only fair to have a voting system that allows all voices to be heard. Not just the voices of 30% of our country."

2. **It's more inclusive.** The research is clear that countries under PR systems have better gender parity in their legislatures.⁴ ⁵ The experience of New Zealand also demonstrates how a PR system could mean better representation for Canada's Indigenous peoples. In 2014 New Zealand elected 25 Members of Parliament of Maori descent - bringing Maori representation up to 20% of the legislature.⁶ ⁷ PR presents parties with opportunities to put forward a broader range of candidates than under FPTP. In a country that is as diverse as Canada, and which grows more diverse every day, what could be more essential to a healthy democracy than a legislature that looks like the people it is serving?

The other consideration is how PR might encourage parties to speak to the entire country. FPTP incentivizes parties to focus on the regions they can easily win seats in, which has implications on election platforms and policy.⁸ Under PR, we would see government that thinks about how its policies

³ An electoral system for all (Broadbent Institute) http://www.broadbentinstitute.ca/an_electoral_system_for_all

⁴ Differential impact of electoral systems on female political representation (Directorate-General for Research, European Parliament): http://www.europarl.europa.eu/workingpapers/femm/w10/2_en.htm

⁵ Women in Parliaments (Inter-parliamentary Union): <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/arc/classif011213.htm>

⁶ The 2014 New Zealand General Election: Final Results and Voting Statistics (New Zealand Parliament):

<https://www.parliament.nz/en/pb/research-papers/document/00PLLawRP2015011/final-results-2014-general-election>

⁷ New Zealand does have 7 seats set aside for the Maori, but it is still notable that under a mixed-member proportional system they elected an additional 18 candidates who identified as having Maori descent.

⁸ <http://publications.gc.ca/collections/Collection/J31-61-2004E.pdf>

impact the entire country, and would also reduce the likelihood of a government that focuses unfairly on the desires of one province or region at the expense of others.

As a Leadnow member from Ontario puts it: *“PR is a fairer system and more accurately representative of the diversity of the views and needs of different communities in Canada. This is a better way of making sure that our system is truly democratic.”*

3. **It’s more collaborative.** There are so many enormous and urgent issues to address in this country, and we need an electoral system that transcends partisanship. **PR would lead to more coalitions, which means more collaboration.**

Under FPTP, the smallest changes in popular vote can lead to big changes in seat distribution. That gives parties in both minority and majority parliaments strong incentives to undermine other parties, then ‘roll the dice’ and call an election to see if they can get ultimate power. PR would lessen these dramatic swings between parties and put the focus back on getting things done.

FPTP leads to majority governments, which are often ‘false majorities’ in which the government got over 50% of the seats without getting over 50% of the popular vote. This means that other parties are effectively shut out of the legislative process and are unable to adequately challenge legislation brought forward by the governing party.⁹

Many have argued that PR would make Canada more unstable - but the experience of other countries with PR doesn’t back that up. Canada has had 22 elections since 1945 - compare that to countries with PR like Germany which has had 18, Italy, which has had 18, and Sweden, which has had 21. On average, there are 3.2 years between federal elections in Canada, which is actually less than many countries with PR.¹⁰

There is also the question of policy stability to consider. Majority governments where parties can put through legislation without the consent of other parties can lead to the next party in power simply reversing those policies, which arguably wastes more time and money than if parties had negotiated with one another in the first place.

As a Leadnow member from Halifax says:

“Give us a system where all votes matter. Make voting worthwhile for everyone. Embrace the diversity of opinion this will bring. Perhaps the resulting need for negotiation and consensus-building between parties will improve the level of discourse in Canadian politics and result in sounder decisions that will better serve the Canadian people. Minority governments are often very productive governments!”

⁹ Voting counts: Electoral reform for Canada (Law Commission of Canada):
<http://publications.gc.ca/collections/Collection/J31-61-2004E.pdf>

¹⁰ An electoral system for all (Broadbent Institute) http://www.broadbentinstitute.ca/an_electoral_system_for_all

A 'made in Canada solution'

Critics of PR often point to examples of countries with PR like Italy and Israel to demonstrate that it leads to instability. Not only does this overlook the other dozens of examples of stable countries that use PR effectively, but it also assumes that PR is applied universally across all these countries. Every country designs their electoral system to accommodate their unique context, and Canada would be no different. For example, the Leadnow community believes strongly that local representation is essential for a country as big and diverse as Canada. Two types of PR systems that offer this quality are mixed member proportional and single transferable vote, but there are others, and we are open to alternate systems.

The five guiding principles of electoral reform

The ERRE committee has been given five guiding principles to consider when evaluating how to replace first-past the post. We believe that PR aligns strongly with these principles.

1. **The link between voter intention and election results**

PR is the only family of electoral systems that would ensure that voter intention is reflected in the seat count in the House of Commons. Other systems like FPTP or Alternative Vote are known as 'winner-take-all' systems which mean that people who vote for losing candidates get no representation. They also often result in extremely distorted results in Parliament, with the popular vote a party received looking very different from the total seats they get in the House. With PR, voters would feel more confident that their decision at the polls would have a direct impact on the overall result, which could improve overall confidence in our democracy.

2. **How to foster civility in politics and increase voter participation.**

As we spoke to above, PR would help to make politics less of a zero-sum game between winners and losers and would encourage collaboration and coalition-building across party lines. Research also shows that countries with PR tend to have better turnout, (although the link is not yet considered conclusive - but the correlation is worth examining further).¹¹

3. **Steps to strengthen inclusiveness and accessibility.**

As we stated above, PR has clear benefits when it comes to improving diversity and representation for women and people of colour in legislatures.

Some have raised that PR might be overly complicated, but there's no reason why that should be the case. Many versions of PR have relatively simple ballots that are accessible to voters. The Leadnow community agrees that voting should continue to be as accessible as possible. PR does not necessarily mean a complicated ballot, and it means that voters have greater choice. Citizens in over 90 countries use PR, and we are confident Canadians could also learn to use a new system.

¹¹ Blais, Andre and Kees Aarts. Electoral systems and turnout, Acta Politica)

4. Ways to safeguard the integrity of our voting system

While this does not relate directly to PR, the Leadnow community agrees that people should feel secure that electoral results are secret and free from interference. (See our section below on online voting.)

5. Taking into account local representation

Changes to the electoral system should maintain local representation to ensure accountability. The Leadnow community strongly agrees that local representation is vital, and many types of PR allow for such representation. Arguably, types of PR that would allow for multi-member ridings could even strengthen local representation by ensuring that constituents have a Member of Parliament that represents the values and policies that they most support.

Other voting reform issues

We also surveyed our members on the other electoral reform topics being studied by the committee.

On mandatory voting, opinions were split, with 40% in favour, 44% against, and 16% unsure. People felt that mandatory voting might improve people's awareness of politics and of elections, but were also concerned about it being a blunt instrument which would take away the duty of political parties and the government to educate and engage voters.

On online voting, opinions were also similarly divided with 46% in favour, 34.7% against, and 19.2% unsure. Some were supportive because they felt it would improve turnout and accessibility and should be possible considering we carry out many other confidential activities online. However, there was also a great deal of concern expressed about security and transparency, with many wondering how we could confirm the system would be free from external interference or influence.

We broke out this question by age, and interestingly, **our members who are under the age of 30 are generally supportive of online voting, with 54% in favour, 26% against, and 20% unsure.**

Finally, we asked our members what they thought about lowering the voting age to 16. While some members felt strongly that 16 year olds are not mature enough to participate in voting, others felt that there would be benefits, especially if it were paired with enhanced civic education in schools. Overall 45.7% were in favour, 39.7% were against, and 14.5% were unsure.

Again, when we broke down the results by age, we saw that **most of our members under the age of 30 are in support of lowering the voting age to 16, with 61% in favour, 25% against, and 14% unsure.**

Conclusion

Our community is united in its belief that the status quo of keeping FPTP is just not okay. It is fundamentally unjust that the votes of millions of people in this country are not reflected in the House of Commons. Thinking that FPTP is a system that has 'served us well' ignores the voices of millions of people whose votes are wasted election after election. Voting is a fundamental right, but FPTP is leaving many people behind.

It doesn't have to be this way. We have options. Canada is one of the last western democracies still using FPTP, and the experience of our friends in the OECD countries shows that proportional representation is the best alternative to a majoritarian FPTP system. It's more fair, it's more inclusive, and it's more collaborative. We urge the committee to look at the evidence and listen to the voices of those who have been marginalized by FPTP. **This is a historic opportunity to bring Canada's democracy into the 21st century, and we urge the committee to do the right thing and replace first-past-the-post with a proportional representation system.** As a Leadnow member from Toronto puts it:

"Political systems evolve. Let us not assume or be lulled into the belief that our system is a static and "finished; done" project. Rather, let us always and continually find ways --- sometimes small; sometimes major --- to better manifest democracy and representation. Let us never fear new ideas. Our current system has shown its flaws; it would be irresponsible to not try something new now."