



Faith in our Vote:
A Public Justice Case for Proportional Representation

Submission to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

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Citizens for Public Justice seeks human flourishing and the integrity of creation as our faithful response to God's call for love and justice.

We envision a world in which individuals, communities, societal institutions, and governments all contribute to and benefit from the common good.

Our mission is to promote public justice in Canada by shaping key public policy debates through research and analysis, publishing, and public dialogue. CPJ encourages citizens, leaders in society, and governments to support policies and practices which reflect God's call for love, justice, and the flourishing of Creation.

Citizenship

Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ) is a national organization of members inspired by faith to act for justice in Canadian public policy. CPJ is supported by a broad, ecumenical membership across Canada and overseen by a national board of directors.

As Christians, we believe that the federal government has a moral commitment to develop policy that is grounded in the common good, giving priority to addressing the needs of the most vulnerable in Canadian society and ensuring that Canada contributes to the well-being of people and the planet.

This work is rooted in the concept of *public justice*, which is defined as the political dimension of loving one's neighbour, caring for creation, and achieving the common good. CPJ views public justice as particularly the responsibility of governments and citizens. In all aspects of our lives—personal, communal, corporate, institutional and political—we are called to implement just policies that allow everyone to live in dignity and participate in society.

Therefore, from a public justice perspective, citizenship is crucially important. Citizenship entitles people to rights, but also requires them to exercise certain responsibilities. Citizens have both the right and the obligation to participate in the creation of laws. They also have the responsibility to ensure that the common good is pursued and that the rights of the marginalized are protected and promoted.

Representation is essential to this pursuit. It requires accountability, dialogue, engagement, and an effective and accessible electoral system that respects the wishes of citizens.¹

Canada's current electoral system, first-past-the-post (FPTP) is flawed in many ways. It is disproportional in its results, and it can discourage citizen engagement. It often leads to strategic voting and the perception of wasted votes, underrepresentation of women and minorities, and declining voter turnout.

There are a variety of possible alternative systems. But the one that is chosen should ensure that a diversity of perspectives among citizens is represented when public policy is made. Special care must be taken so that the rights of minorities are recognized and regarded.²

Electoral systems of proportional representation (PR) have greater proportionality in their distribution of seats, foster greater engagement, and eliminate the perception of wasted votes. Some systems, such as mixed member PR, also maintain strong geographic representation.

CPJ, therefore, recommends that the Canadian government adopt a system of **mixed-member proportional representation** (PR) that is:

- **effective and legitimate**, yielding electoral results that match the will of the people;
- **engaging**, encouraging citizens to participate in the electoral process;
- **accessible**, maintaining a simple voting process;
- **inclusive**, representing women and minorities in the House of Commons; and
- **representative**, maintaining strong connections between voters and local representatives.

¹ Citizens for Public Justice, [Just Representation? A CPJ Backgrounder on Electoral Reform and Representation](#) (April 15, 2009).

² Citizens for Public Justice, [Guidelines for Christian political service and Charter of social rights and responsibilities](#).

Effectiveness and Legitimacy

A major problem with the FPTP electoral system is disproportionate outcomes, that is, where the number of seats a party wins in the House of Commons is not proportionate to the number of votes that the party receives nation or province-wide.

One of the principal distortions is that while smaller parties receive significant votes, they are entirely shut out from the House of Commons. FPTP systems are also frequently characterized by decisive majority governments elected by less than a majority of voters, and seat distribution that does not reflect votes proportionally on a national scale.

For example, the past two federal elections have yielded false majorities. In 2011, the Conservative Party won 54% of the seats (and arguably 100% power) with just 40% of the vote.³ In 2015, the Liberal Party similarly won a majority with 54% of the seats, this time with just 39% of the vote. Meanwhile, the Green Party won 3.5% of the vote in 2015 and 3.9% in 2011, both times earning them just one seat (0.3% of seats).⁴

Electoral systems with an element of PR generally focus on the greater proportionality of seat distribution, which is more fair and representative. Under a proportional system, the plurality won by the Liberals would have given them a minority government (39% of the seats) and the Green Party would have won 12 seats with their 3.5% of the vote.⁵

Under a system of PR, citizens would be confident that their votes are fairly and legitimately translated into representation. It would eliminate the perception of wasted votes, or of different weights accorded to votes based on the geographical location of voters.

Any new PR system adopted in Canada must, therefore, be fully proportional. Semi-proportional or non-proportional options, single-transferable vote and alternative voting respectively, do not meet this criterion.⁶

Engagement

Under FPTP, the lack of confidence in the efficacy of voting often results in the perception of wasted votes. The zero sum nature of the battle in each electoral district gives rise to strategic voting, whereby voters opt for their second or third choice candidate in hopes of preventing a candidate they do not want from winning. It also makes people feel that votes for all those candidates that are not elected are wasted. This has contributed to voter disillusionment and lower voter turnout. Although there was an increase in voter turnout from 2011 to 2015 (up from 61.1% to 68.3%), Canadians still do not vote at rates they did from 1957 to 1988. In the 12 federal elections during this period, voter turnout averaged 75.5%.⁷

Though it is unlikely that a single factor, such as the electoral system, is to blame for declining voter turnout, a PR system would help to curb this effect.⁸ PR would ensure that each vote had the same weight when it comes to the make up of the House of Commons. For voters who had previously

³ Elections Canada, [Forty-First General Election 2011: Official Voting Results](#).

⁴ Elections Canada, [Forty-Second General Election 2015: Official Voting Results](#).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Samara Canada with Stewart Prest, PhD, [What We Talk About When We Talk About Electoral Reform](#) (2016).

⁷ Elections Canada, [Voter Turnout at Federal Elections and Referendums](#).

⁸ Fair Vote Canada, [Why Proportional Representation? A look at the evidence](#) (January 2016).

stayed home for fear of ‘wasting their vote’ on a losing candidate, this would incentivize them to turnout.⁹

Accessibility and Inclusiveness

The current underrepresentation of women and minorities among elected members is a by-product of our FPTP system. Women make up just 26% of MPs in the House of Commons, and 14.2% of MPs are visible minorities¹⁰; according to the 2011 National Household Survey, 19.1% of Canadian are visible minorities.¹¹

In explaining this trend, critics point to the power that incumbency holds in the current electoral system. As well, a FPTP system tends to encourage parties to run so-called “safe” or “typical” politicians. In contrast, the use of PR systems has been correlated with greater numerical representation of women and minorities.

Any changes to Canada’s voting system must also be coupled with policies that make voting more accessible for those who lack a permanent address or photo identification. This may include strengthening Canada’s system of vouching and making sure polling stations are in areas accessible to typically excluded populations.

Some have argued that PR systems, such as preferential voting, are too complicated for voters to understand. Aside from the patronizing and elitist assumptions in such arguments, truly proportional systems, including list and mixed-member proportional representation, are simple enough to be adopted easily in Canada. In an open list PR system, for example, multiple candidates from multiple parties will appear on the ballot. However, just as in a FPTP system, voters still cast one ballot for one candidate from one party. In a mixed-member PR system, voters mark two boxes, one for a party and one for a candidate.¹² Any minor added complexity here is surely worth not only the proportional election result, but also the freedom of voters to split their vote between their preferred party and preferred candidate.

Local representation

While a system of FPTP provides strong local representation, several systems of PR also allow citizens to have a local representative in the House of Commons. FPTP creates a direct constituent-representative link by having a single member for every electoral district. This ensures voters have one representative to represent geographic concerns.

A list PR system tends to dilute this link as voters will have many MPs in large multi-member districts. As a result, access to MPs tends to be issue-oriented rather than geographically-based.¹³

A mixed-member PR system, on the other hand, retains a geographical link because this system maintains local, single-member electoral districts and ensures that voters have one MP that is accountable to their riding.

⁹ Prairie Research Associates, [Voter Turnout in the 2016 Provincial Election: A survey of voters and non-voters](#) (September 2016).

¹⁰ Amanda Shendruk and Nick Taylor-Vaisey, [The Shape of the House](#), Macleans (October 2015).

¹¹ Statistics Canada, [NHS Profile, Canada, 2011](#).

¹² Samara Canada with Stewart Prest, PhD.

¹³ Ibid.

Conclusion

Canadian democracy suffers from many problems including voter apathy, bitter partisanship, and a public discourse focused on style instead of substance.

Electoral reform does not address all of these issues, nor is it the sole answer to any one of them. Indeed, the solution to these problems will also include (amongst other things) a free media, an educated and active citizenry, and an accountable government.

However, implementing a system of mixed-member proportional representation will help Canada take significant steps to improve the state of our democracy.

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