



# NDP submission to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

# Introduction

Over the course of the past four months New Democrat Members of Parliament launched country-wide public consultations on the pressing issue of electoral reform. Our goal was to hear directly from Canadians about how they feel we can make our voting system fairer, and ensure that our elections produce governments that truly reflect what Canadians want. From Rimouski to Port Alberni, and downtown Toronto to remote Atlin, BC, Canadians were eager to be part of this conversation. It seemed that for almost every meeting we held, we had to scramble to find more chairs. We are pleased to present the results of our consultations in this report.

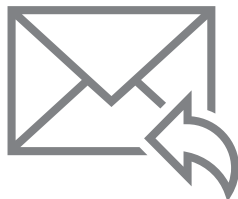
Through town hall meetings, online engagement and mailed surveys, NDP MPs heard from more than 37,000 Canadians about their thoughts on electoral reform, including:



More than 40 town hall events with over 3000 participants



Telephone town halls and online surveys reaching 12,500 people



Over 2600 responses to mail back cards



More than 15,000 signatures on our petition calling for proportional representation

In addition to the proactive efforts made by our MPs to reach out to their communities, thousands more contacted their MPs directly by phone or email to give their support for a fairer, proportional electoral system.

## Background: The urgent need to fix our broken system

Across the country Canadians feel their votes are not being counted and their voices not properly reflected in our Parliament. In every round of consultations Canadians repeated this sentiment and it is very clear why they have come to share this belief.

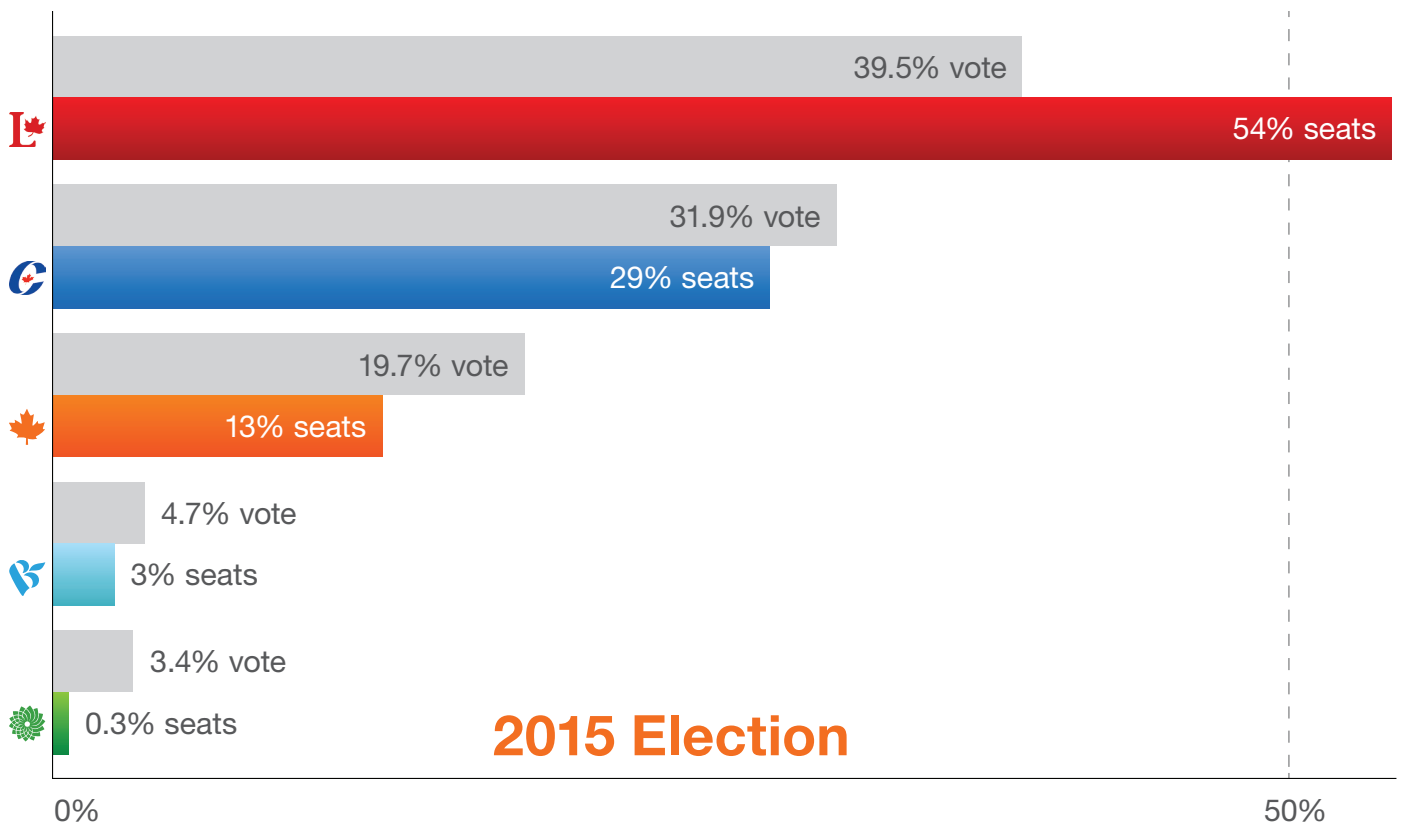
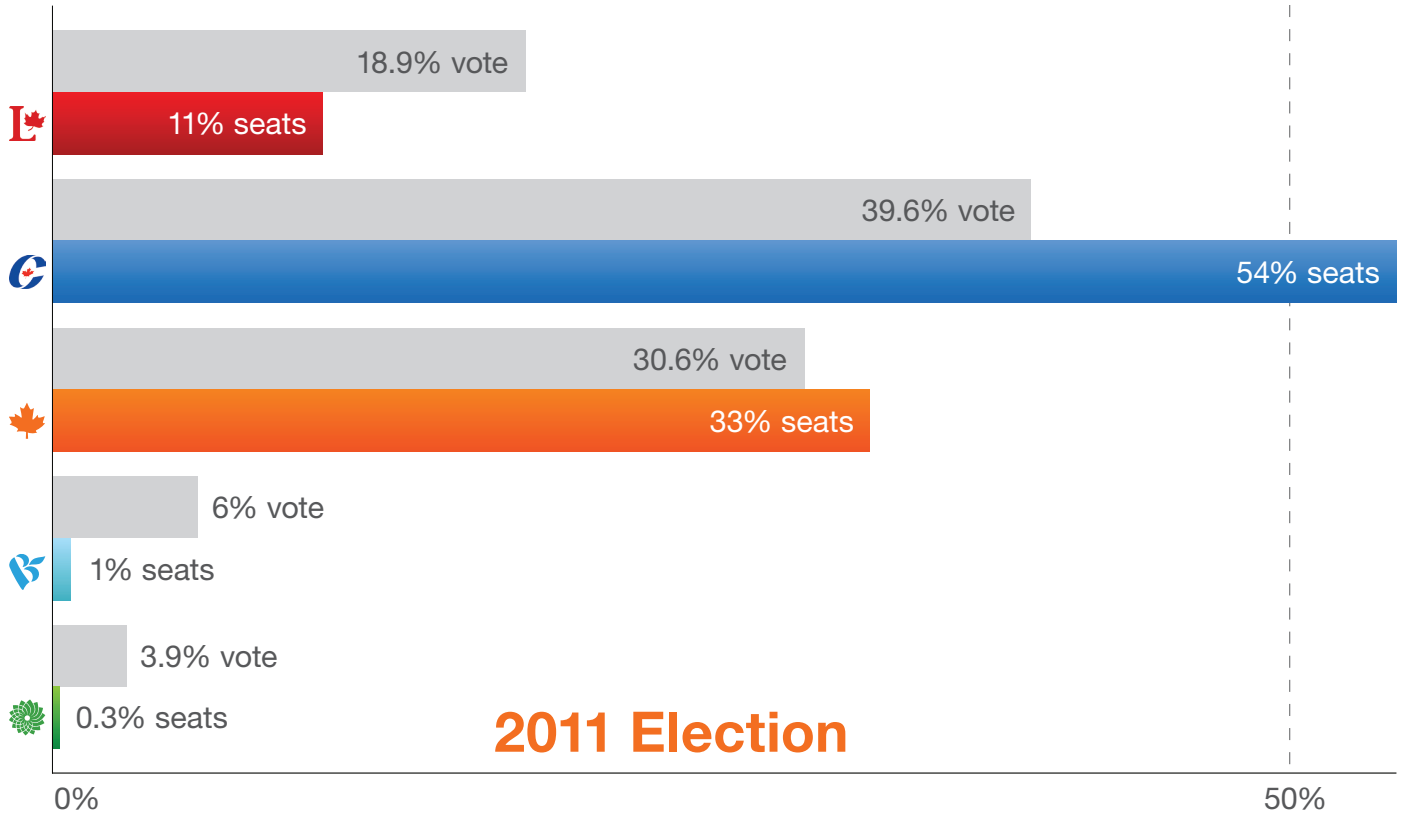
As Minister Monsef herself noted this past May, the first-past-the-post system distorts the will of the electorate. Canada has elected 18 majority governments since the First World War, but only four of them have been elected with more than 50% of the vote - and it has been 32 years since it last happened. Our first-past-the-post electoral system does not work for Canada in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: we are a multi-party nation that is regionally, culturally, and linguistically diverse, yet continuing to elect our parliament using a 19<sup>th</sup> century two-party voting system. This is the political equivalent of the square peg meeting a round hole.

Canadians understand this contradiction on a practical level. In the last election, more than seventeen million Canadians voted, but nine million of those votes - more than half of all votes cast -- were not for winning candidates and so effectively elected no one and were wasted. Majorities have been won in the last two federal elections with less than 40% of the popular vote. The Green Party captured 603,000 votes (3.45% of the total) but only received one seat (0.3% of the total). In the Atlantic provinces, the Conservative Party received more than 19% of votes but didn't get a single seat, while on Vancouver Island, both the Conservatives and Liberals failed to get a single seat with more than a fifth of all votes each.

Canadians have sent us a clear message: they want us to reform our electoral system. Almost two-thirds of Canadians voted for parties that promised to abolish first-past-the-post voting in the October 2015 election. Public polling consistently echoes this support, including a recent Abacus survey in which 83% of respondents said that Canada's voting system is in need of reform.

The New Democrat MPs believe the Special Committee on Electoral Reform has both the public mandate and the responsibility to recommend changes that will resolve the unfair distortions that plague our centuries-old electoral system. Throughout our consultations Canadians expressed their hope that this committee will succeed in this important work; and that they expect the government to keep its promise that 2015 was the last election under the old system.

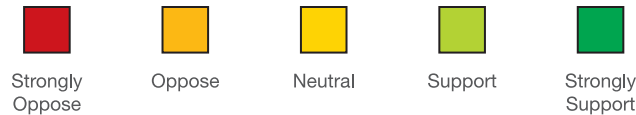
Distortions in the results of the last two federal elections under a first past the post system



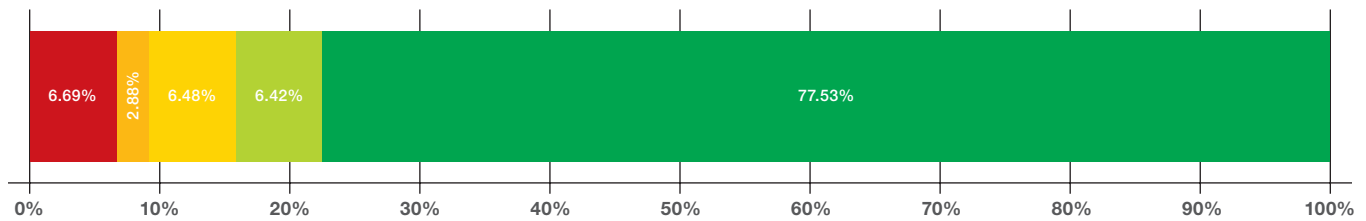
# Results of public consultations: Canadians want proportional representation

As requested by the Special Committee on Electoral Reform, NDP MPs held numerous consultations on electoral reform. At each town hall, citizens were asked to give their opinion on a series of questions on the principles proposed by the Special Committee. Participants had the opportunity to express their points of view and raise their questions throughout each session.

The following are the key conclusions that we drew from these consultations:



## Canadians are overwhelmingly in favour of the principle of proportionality

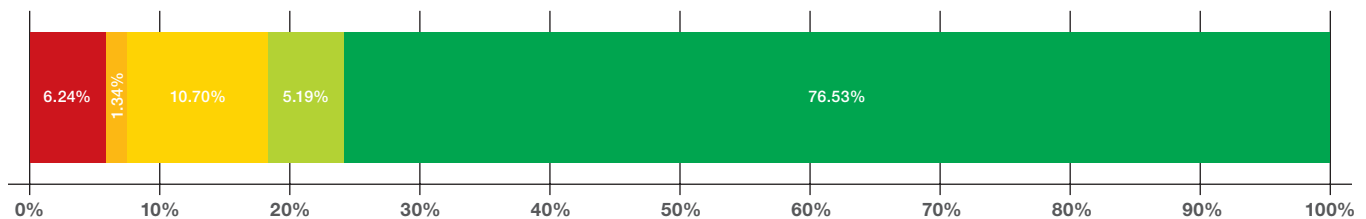


**84.3%** of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the following statement: “A party’s seats in Parliament should reflect the percentage of votes they received.”

Canadians want a voting system that meets their expectations of fairness and for the vast majority that means making the number of seats closely match the popular vote a party receives.

Canadians want their votes to count. Proportionality would ensure that the number of seats that a party has in Parliament reflects the percentage of votes it obtained. It would also ensure that if someone’s chosen candidate is not elected, their votes still count towards the broader makeup of Parliament, rather than simply being thrown out. Many citizens don’t feel their vote counted or don’t feel represented by the makeup of their government. They believe proportional voting would address these problems.

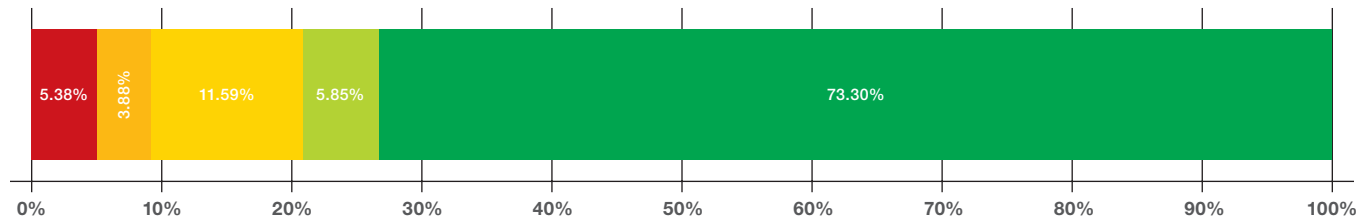
## Canadians want local representation



**81.7%** of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the following statement: “Having a local representative is important to me.”

Even if they don’t often visit their MP’s office, participants showed a strong attachment to the person that represents their community. They like knowing the MP who will act as their voice in Parliament, whether it’s to simply to tell them if they’re doing a good job or to share their opinions on issues that are important to them. They also value the services offered by their local MP office. The message is clear: participants want to maintain the local connection to their Member of Parliament.

### Canadians think it is important for parties to work together to choose a new electoral system

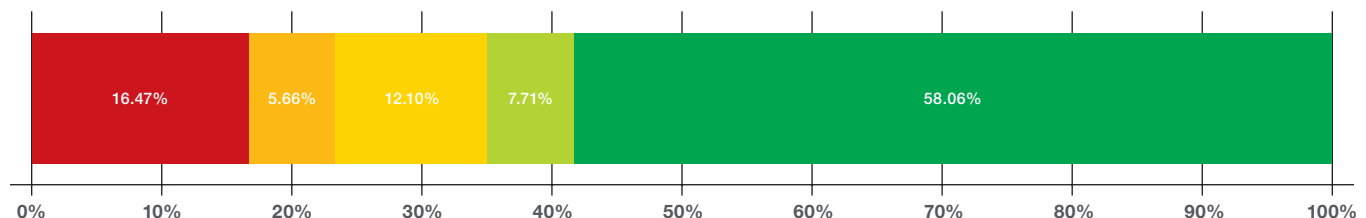


**79.1%** of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the following statement: “Working collaboratively and having cross-party support for a new system is vital.” They also told us they were tired of partisan behaviour and the lack of collaboration that persists in our politics. They want all parties to work together to find a new electoral system that reflects the many realities of Canadians.

## Additional issues raised

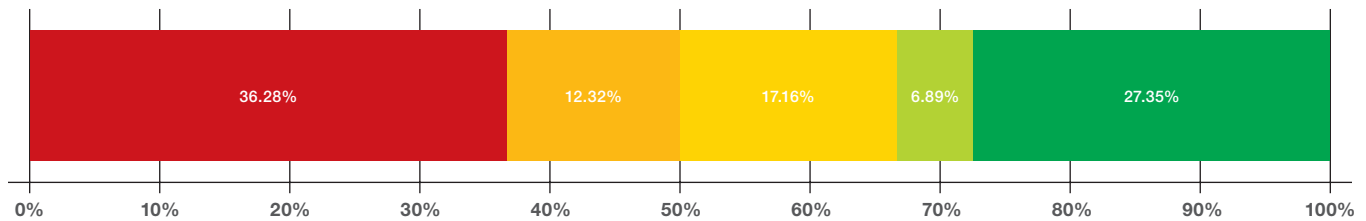
The committee also asked Members of Parliament to consider online voting and mandatory voting. In addition, New Democrats also polled their constituents on their views about lowering the voting age, and increasing the representation of women and people from diverse backgrounds in Parliament.

### Diversity and gender equity



Over 66% of respondents said that increasing the representation of women and people from diverse backgrounds should be a priority of our new voting system. Canadians believe our national institutions should reflect the country they represent. Our current House of Commons is only 26% women, and Canada currently ranks 64th in the world when it comes to gender parity in parliament - it’s time for this to change.

## Lowering the voting age



There appears to be less consensus on this issue, as 34% of respondents said they would support lowering the voting age to 16 years old, while 49% think now isn't the time.

**Mandatory voting.** Canadians seem divided on the issue of mandatory voting. They view democratic participation as an important duty and want to see higher levels of engagement between and during elections. They are also apprehensive about the government compelling their fellow citizens to vote. It was suggested by many that, rather than fine those who do not vote as is the case in Australia, the government might consider incentivizing Canadians to vote, rather than punishing them for not voting, by offering a small tax credit for those who do cast their ballot.

**Online voting.** Being able to vote electronically could potentially allow many more Canadians to cast a ballot on election day, including Canadians overseas, in medical care, in remote areas, or those living with disabilities. However, respondents were also reluctant to embrace electronic voting due to concerns about the potential for systems to crash, or be hacked by those seeking to distort the outcome of an election.

**Canadians want a legitimate process.** During our consultations, Canadians were also clear that they want the electoral reform process to be fair and legitimate. People expressed frustration with the Conservatives' unilateral changes to the *Elections Act* during the last Parliament and said they don't want to see the government use its majority of seats to rig the system for its own benefit. When it came to how to ensure legitimacy and fairness, responses varied between expanded consultations, requiring multi-party support, and potentially a referendum before adoption or after two or more elections. Canadians want change to make the system fairer and they want the process of making the change to be fair as well.

## Conclusions

Participation in our consultations was impressive. Canadians across the country, in communities large and small, rural and urban, came together to weigh in on a once in a generation opportunity.

This opportunity is not simply the chance to *change* our electoral system, but to *fix* the problems that have undermined the results of our elections for too long.

Canadians were clear about what they wanted: fairer, more proportional results that actually reflect how they vote; to keep their locally elected representatives; and for all parties to work together to ensure that we move towards a system that makes sense for our modern and diverse country.

They remain hopeful that the Prime Minister will fulfill his election promise to make the 2015 election our last under the first-past-the-post system. They are encouraged by this committee's work and look forward to the next steps that it will propose. Above all, one thing is certain, the Canadians we spoke to are counting on us to ensure that our next electoral system makes every vote count.