Electoral reform could be good for your health

By Steve Barnes

The Wellesley Institute works to improve health equity in the Greater Toronto Area through action on the social determinants of health.

Wellesley Institute
advancing urban health

The Liberal Party promised that 2015 would be the last election conducted using the first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system. They backed this up by committing to convene an "all-party Parliamentary committee to review a wide variety of reforms, such as ranked ballots, proportional representation, mandatory voting, and online voting." The Parliamentary committee will report back within 18 months and legislation to enact electoral reform would be introduced (Liberal Party of Canada, 2015).

Electoral reform is an important opportunity for Canadians to reimagine how we interact with our democratic institutions. Fundamentally, electoral systems are about the role of citizens in shaping parliaments and how democratic institutions reflect our collective desires. But electoral systems do more than just this. The choice of a nation's electoral system shapes who is elected, who forms governments and how power is distributed, both within legislatures and between voters and decision makers. Electoral systems are sociopolitical tools that influence the policies that affect Canadians' lives.

Since the election there has been some talk about the various electoral systems that could be used in Canada, with debate largely focusing on which parties would be advantaged or disadvantaged by particular systems. But given the enormous power that electoral systems hold over political and policy outcomes it is important to think about electoral reform as more than something that affects political parties and elections.

How electoral reform may influence the health and well-being of Canadians is an important consideration. This think piece bridges the connections between electoral systems, political trust, social capital and health to demonstrate why and how changing our electoral system may have health impacts. It argues that while we often think about the health of our democracy we seldom consider how our democratic institutions may affect our health. We often think of poverty as a lack of income leading to material deprivation but inherent to poverty is social exclusion from 'the ordinary living patterns, customs and activities' of society (Townsend, 1979). By taking a health-based approach to electoral reform we can choose an electoral system that reduces social exclusion and builds social capital and health. The federal government's commitment to reform Canada's electoral system is an important opportunity to choose an electoral system that improves the health of Canadians.

## Electoral Systems, Political Trust, Social Capital and Health

The connections between electoral systems and health may not be apparent at first glace. There are, however, important connections that need to be thought through as part of Canada's process of electoral reform. Electoral systems influence political trust, a component of social capital. High levels of social capital within a community can have positive health impacts; ergo, electoral systems have the potential to contribute to health and well-being, as demonstrated in Figure 1.

Electoral systems are the cornerstones of our democratic institutions. How we vote has influence over which candidates are elected, which parties form government, the composition of governments and, ultimately, the policies that are implemented by governments.

Political trust – citizen "confidence that authorities will observe the rules of the game and serve the general interest" (Citrin, 1999) – is critical to well-functioning democracies. For democracies to succeed citizens must trust that their elected officials and democratic institutions reflect the will of the electorate and work in the interest of the population. If a democracy does not meet this basic requirement it may be

Figure 1: Theory of Connections between Electoral Systems and Health
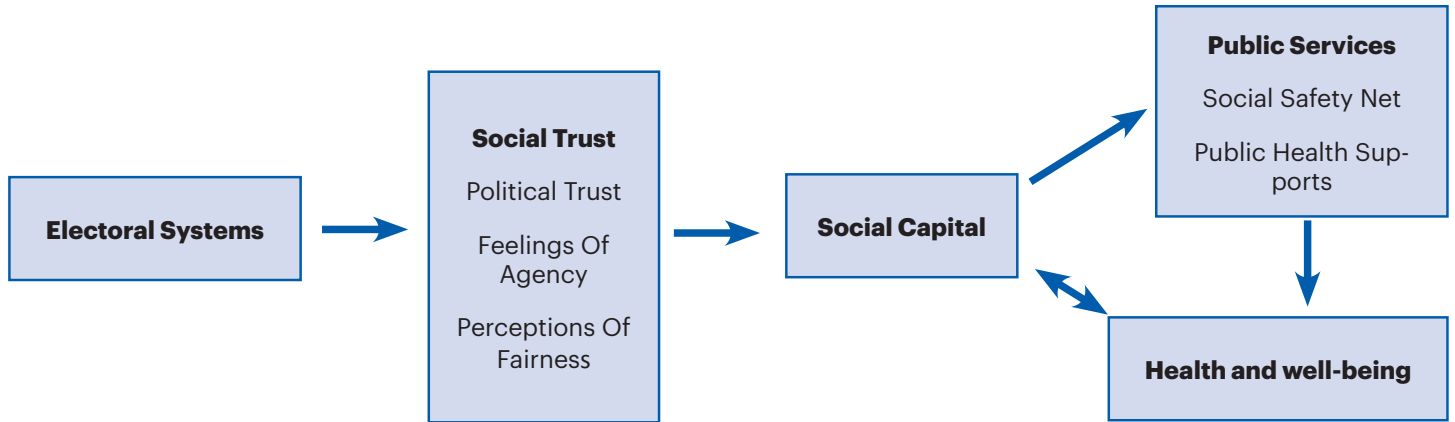
perceived as untrustworthy. This is not to say that political trust is a binary democratic component that either does or does not exist. Political trust relies heavily on citizen confidence – a quality that may ebb and flow over time. Political trust lies on a spectrum and can change dynamically over time.

Social trust is the mechanism through which political trust contributes to social capital. There are many similarities between social and political trust but it is important to consider them separately. Social trust grows from immediate, first-hand interactions with others within a society. Political trust, on the other hand, develops at a greater distance based on higher level experiences and interactions, such as pride in the national political system and perceptions of the openness of governments (Newton, 2013).

The political science literature demonstrates that political trust tends to be higher in societies that have proportional electoral systems (Thomassen and Esaiasson, 2006), although it is less clear whether political trust is generated by having a proportional electoral system or whether societies that already have high levels of political trust are more likely to implement proportional systems.

Political trust may be enhanced when citizens can elect parliaments that reflect the diversity of their society. Citizens perceive that the more a parliament mirrors the electorate the more it values and cares for the society (van der Meer, 2010). Proportional electoral systems tend to elect a greater diversity of candidates, with these systems tending to result in a greater proportion of women being elected and parties putting forward a more diverse field of candidates, thereby appealing to a more diverse range of voters who see themselves represented (Rosen, 2013).

Political trust tends to be enhanced in societies in which parliaments are perceived to be competent, accountable and reliable and that intrinsically care for the electorate (van der Meer, 2010). Proportional systems tend to score higher on these measures, in part because citizens are more likely to see their preferred party represented in parliament and there is a greater diversity of voices in the policy making process (Dunn, 2012). Governments may be perceived to be more caring when they are supported by a larger share of the population (van der Meer, 2010). Switching to proportional systems has been linked to the development of more comprehensive health and social programs owing to greater dialogue and negotiation in the formation of governments and policy making (Selway, 2011).

Political trust and perceptions of fairness go hand in hand. Citizens are more likely to trust their political institutions if they feel that the process for electing representatives is fair (Dunn, 2012). The existence of an electoral system that formalizes and reaffirms that all citizens have a voice within a society means that even when individuals disagree with the outcome of an election they maintain their high level of trust in their representatives institutions. This holds true even if the party that a citizen voted for is not represented in parliament, further demonstrating the power of agency. On the other hand, the perception of not having their voice heard in majoritarian systems can lead to erosion of citizens' political trust (Dunn, 2012).

High levels of political trust are associated with higher levels of voting owing to feeling that it is possible to influence politics and policy. Countries with higher voter turnout and political trust tend to have more comprehensive welfare policies that can benefit people in lower socio-economic positions and groups who have greater need for health care services (Lindstrom and Mohseni, 2009).

Political Trust and Social Capital

Political trust is an important concept in understanding how citizens interact with institutions. But political trust is more than this: political trust contributes to social capital, the 'social glue that holds society together' (Kawachi and Berkman, 2000). Political scientist Robert Putnam described social capital as the features of social life that enable people to work together more effectively toward shared objectives. Putnam specifically identified networks, norms and trust as key components of social capital (Putnam, 1996). Social capital includes collective efficacy, social trust/reciprocity, participation in voluntary organizations and social integration for mutual benefit (McKenzie et al., 2002).

The concept of social capital can be categorized as structural or cognitive. The structural components of social capital are the formal elements of a society, such as roles, rules, precedents, behaviours, networks and institutions. Cognitive social capital, on the other hand, describes "values, attitudes and beliefs that produce cooperative behaviour" (McKenzie et al., 2002). Electoral systems have connections to both structural and cognitive social capital. Electoral systems are parts of formal institutions that shape the roles of citizens in political processes, determine the rules of the game for influencing election results and influence the behaviours of both voters and candidates and are therefore a component of structural social capital. Electoral systems also shape political trust, which focuses on how power holders act in the general interest, and therefore are part of cognitive social capital.

The components that comprise social capital exist at the individual and ecological level. For example, individuals may benefit from participation in voluntary organizations and may have strong feelings of social trust, but the social capital that accumulates as a result of these actions and feelings accrues at the community level (social cohesion) (McKenzie et al., 2002, Kawachi et al., 1997, Murayama et al., 2012).

Not all social capital is alike, with key differences between social capital that bonds versus bridges. Bonding social capital refers to the "trusting and cooperative" relations that occur within homogenous groups (Murayama et al., 2012), for example, strong relationships within an ethnic group or social class. This is differentiated from bridging social capital which describes relationships between heterogeneous groups who have differences in social identity and power (Murayama et al., 2012). Bridging social capital offers greater potential to foster social inclusion as it exists as a shared resource across a community and improves feelings of generalized trust within societies (Freitag and Bühlmann, 2009).

Because social capital exists at the ecological level it can be difficult to articulate the connections between social capital and health which is primarily viewed as an individual level attribute. There is, however, evidence that high levels of social capital within a community can have positive health impacts at both the individual and community level. Kawachi and Berkman identified four key mechanisms through which social capital is linked to health (Kawachi and Berkman, 2000):

- **Health promotion information**: Health-related behaviour is influenced by norms and values held by societies. Healthy behaviour can be encouraged through the rapid diffusion and uptake of health promotion information.
- **Healthy community norms**: Healthy behaviour can be facilitated through the establishment of norms within a community around the importance of physical activity, or through social control over deviant behaviour, such as smoking or illicit drug use.
- **Access to services**: Access to local services and amenities tend to be better protected in neighbourhoods and communities with high levels of social capital where residents are able to advocate to create or protect services.
- **Psychosocial processes**: Living in a community with high levels of social capital may contribute to health via psychosocial processes by providing affective support and being a source of self-esteem and mutual respect. Communities with high social capital take public responsibility for others in their community, even when they do not know one another, thereby making people feel cared for.

There is evidence that bridging social capital has greater impacts on health than bonding social capital. A Japanese study found that survey respondents who reported that they participated in civic groups that represented a diverse range of populations with respect to age group, gender, and occupation (bridging) had significantly higher levels of self-rated health than respondents who participated in homogenous civic groups (bonding). The positive health impacts of bridging social capital occurred for both sexes but were more pronounced for women (Murayama et al., 2012). This is consistent with findings that show that close-knit communities with high levels of bonding social capital are not necessarily healthy, especially for outsiders (McKenzie et al., 2002). Social capital has the greatest potential to improve health when it manifests as bridging, not bonding, integration.

Building a Healthy Electoral System for Canada

The federal government has committed to changing Canada's electoral system through a process of widespread consultation. To date, much of the public dialogue about potential electoral system reforms has focused on how various systems would benefit or disadvantage each of the main political parties and the constitutionality of changes. At the margins there has been some discussion of how electoral systems can influence the types of candidates that are elected (and electable), with certain systems being more favourable for underrepresented groups such as women. There has not, however, been discussion of how electoral systems can influence health and well-being of residents.

Given the potential for electoral systems to influence social capital and health in Canada it is important to consider electoral reform through a health lens. Fundamentally electoral systems are about control: who can vote, how their vote is counted and whether they have real influence over the outcome in their riding or nationally. Electoral reform should aim to increase the level of control over political and policy processes that citizens wield.

There are four key electoral systems that are part of the discussion of electoral reform in Canada: First-

Past-the-Post (FPTP), preferential voting (instant runoff), proportional representation (party list proportional representation and Single Transferable Vote) and hybrid systems, with Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) being the most prominent. Each of these systems is briefly reviewed to assess how it may influence political trust, social capital and health. This paper argues that proportional representation and hybrid systems offer the greatest opportunity to contribute to a healthier Canada.

First-Past-the-Post

First-Past-the-Post is Canada's existing electoral system. FPTP is a relatively simple electoral system: the country is divided into ridings and each riding is represented by a single Member of Parliament. On Election Day the candidate in each riding who receives the most votes wins and becomes the local representative in Parliament.

The simplicity of FPTP is its main benefit. This system is very easy to understand, vote counting is simple and representatives may be perceived as legitimate owing to their success in winning more votes than any of their opponents. A secondary benefit of FPTP is that there is a single, clearly identifiable representative for each riding (as opposed to multi-member districts) whose undefined role is to assist constituents with a broad range of issues (Loat and MacMillan, 2014).

FPTP has limitations, however. To win a riding a candidate only has to receive a single vote more than their opponent. FPTP is a winner-takes-all system, which means that the winning candidate may receive only a handful more votes than their closest opponent but still takes 100 percent of the victory and power. Additionally, where ridings have multiple candidates the winning candidate may receive relatively few votes owing to vote fragmentation, which can create perceptions of illegitimacy especially if voter turnout is low. For example, a candidate may win after receiving only 25 percent of the votes cast in an election with 50 percent turnout, meaning that only 12.5 percent of eligible voters actually cast a vote for the winning candidate.

A major limitation of FPTP is that some voters have much more influence than others owing to how others in their riding vote. Voters who live in seats that are "safe" for a particular party or candidate have very little chance of influencing the outcome in their riding. By contrast, voters in marginal seats have far greater potential to influence the outcome in their riding and their vote therefore has greater value than the votes of those in safe seats.

From the perspective of political trust, social capital and health, FPTP appears to offer the greatest benefits to voters who live in marginal ridings whose votes are more likely to affect the winner in their race. Voters in safe or even relatively safe seats do not enjoy this control over the political process. Under FPTP all residents within a riding may benefit from the availability of a local MP, thereby providing a formal mechanism for raising grievances and providing input into political and policy making processes.

These benefits are likely outweighed by the potential for FPTP to be perceived as creating unfair outcomes, thereby eroding political trust. In close elections voters who supported the losing candidate may feel that their wishes were not reflected in the final result even through their preferred candidate received only a handful fewer votes than the winner. This effect may be amplified when there are numerous close races in ridings across the country which can lead to a large number of MPs being elected by small margins. In some cases many of these MPs represent a single party that may be able to form a majority government

without receiving a majority of votes. Additionally, because each riding elects an MP independently of other ridings and not all ridings have equal numbers of residents it is possible for FPTP elections to deliver power to a party that does not even receive the most votes across the country, with the party instead narrowly winning a majority of ridings.

A second barrier to political trust associated with FPTP is the fact that, in practice, not all votes carry the same weight with voters in marginal ridings having relatively greater influence over election outcomes than voters who live in safe ridings. Citizens who do not support the dominant party in safe ridings may not feel well represented or that they have an advocate to whom they can turn. This may also dissuade residents from volunteering on a campaign, donating to their preferred candidate or even voting.

Preferential/Instant-Runoff Voting

In an instant-runoff system voters cast their vote for candidates in a single riding, as in FPTP. To vote, voters place a 1 next to their preferred candidate, a 2 next to their second preference and so on. Voters can rank as many or as few candidates as they wish. To determine the winner the first preferences of every voter are tabulated (i.e., all of the number 1 votes are counted). If a candidate receives 50 percent plus one of the votes they are declared the winner. If no candidate reaches that threshold the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and the second preferences of their voters are counted. This process continues until one candidate has a majority.

Ranked ballots have the advantage of ensuring that a majority of people living within a riding have indicated some level of support for the winning candidate even if they weren't their first choice which may increase perceptions of the MPs legitimacy in their role. This also reduces the number of residents who did not support the winning candidate who may feel that they are poorly represented or that they do not have an advocate in Parliament. Ranked ballots can therefore reduce some of the feelings of distance from MPs that can occur in FPTP and this may increase political trust.

There are three limitations to ranked ballots. First, voters who live in safe ridings still may not feel that their vote carries weight, especially if they prefer less popular candidates. This may result in voters in some ridings feeling less invested in elections, politics and policy making than voters with greater influence. The second limitation is that while voting is relatively simple, it does require more thought and effort than placing an X beside a single candidate and the tabulation of votes is more complex and may be poorly understood. This may turn potential voters off from participating in elections.

A third limitation is that while instant-runoff votes may make elections fairer at the riding level they do not eliminate the possibility of governments being elected with spurious majorities. Under instant-runoff parties may still be able to form majority governments that are disproportionate to the share of votes that they received. While voters may feel more in control of democratic processes at the local level, this does not necessarily translate to influence at the national level or to political and policy making processes.

Proportional Representation

There are two proportional representation (PR) voting types: party list PR and Single Transferable Vote (STV). The defining feature of proportional representation is that the number of seats a party receives in parliament is proportional to their share of the popular vote; a party that receives 35 percent support will

receive around 35 percent of the seats in parliament. A second feature of PR systems is the existence of multi-member districts. This is because electing single members in discreet constituencies is inherently disproportional. The larger the size of the constituency, the more proportional the outcome of an election becomes. Israel is the most notable example of this with the entire nation comprising of a single constituency. Other nations with PR vary in the size of electoral districts, from two members per district up to 100.

In party list PR candidates win seats based on their relative positions on their party's list of candidates. These party lists can either be drawn up internally by parties (closed list PR) or the order of candidates can be determined by voters with the final list being determined by how many votes each candidate receives (open lists). There are a number of different methods to determine how votes are translated into seats in parliament, but each formula allocates a certain number of seats to each party that approximates their share of the popular vote. Candidates are elected if their ranking on their party's list is above the cut-off line.

STV operates similarly to instant-runoff systems but the counting process ensures greater proportionality in the final results. Voters cast preferential ballots, as per instant-runoff, but in the case of STV each electoral district elects multiple MPs. In order to win a seat a candidate must receive a minimum number of votes. The quota of votes required to be elected is calculated using a formula based on the number of votes cast and the number of seats to fill. A key difference between instant-runoff and STV is that once a candidate reaches the quota to be elected their surplus votes are redistributed (i.e., the votes received over and above what the candidate required to be elected). If no other candidates reach the quota following this redistribution then the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and their second preference votes are redistributed. This method of voting ensures that candidates who receive few first preference votes can still be elected if they are the second or third choice of many voters.

The major benefit of PR is that these systems fairly accurately translate voters' preferences into seats in parliament. That every voter has an opportunity to express their preference and genuinely contribute to the composition of parliament is an important cornerstone of representative democracy. Every vote cast carries equal weight which may contribute to higher levels of political trust.

PR systems also carry the possibility of electing a more diverse range of representatives. This is especially true in closed list PR systems where parties can give higher rankings to candidates who may face barriers to being elected in traditional single member districts, such as women and minority groups (Rosen, 2013). Parliaments that mirror their electorate are perceived to care more about citizens, which contributes to increased political trust (van der Meer, 2010).

PR systems tend to elect a greater number of parties, including smaller parties that appeal to niche constituencies. This may give voters a greater range of parties and candidates that are perceived to have a real chance of being elected which may lead to improved feelings of involvement and control. The risk is that fringe parties can be elected and can have disproportionate influence on who forms a government in close elections. This risk can be modified to some extent by establishing a threshold that must be achieved before a party wins seats, for example, four percent of the popular vote.

There are two key disadvantages to PR systems from a political trust perspective. The first is that single member ridings would be eliminated in favour of multi-member districts that could be drawn to elect anything from two MPs to a single national constituency for all of Canada. The latter option is extremely unlikely in a nation as large and diverse as Canada, but residents may still feel less connected to individual MPs in multi-member districts where lines of accountability are blurred. This could lead to lower levels

of political trust.

A second disadvantage of PR systems is that in closed list formats voters may have low levels of control over selecting the candidates that are actually elected owing to high levels of party control that cannot be amended by voters. Voters may prefer candidates who are ranked low on their preferred party's list but have no ability to express their preference or alter the order of the candidate ranking. This disadvantage can be addressed by implementing an open-list system, but this may undermine the greater ability of women and minorities to be elected with dominant groups being more likely to receive high rankings.

One feature of PR systems that can be an advantage or disadvantage, depending on perspective, is the increased likelihood that no party will win a majority government. This means more coalition and informal vote-by-vote agreements with other parties that may mean less stable government, but a parliament in which the governing parties must negotiate with all parties (including with other governing parties in the case of coalitions or confidence and supply agreements) to ensure that legislation is passed. Having a diversity of voices in policy and legislative processes has been demonstrated to increase political trust (Dunn, 2012).

Hybrid Systems

Hybrid systems, as the name suggests, blend together elements of other electoral systems. Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) is the most common of hybrid systems. In MMP voters have two votes. The first and most important is the party vote. The party vote operates as a party list proportional representation system where a nation is a single constituency. The party vote determines the share of seats in parliament that each party is entitled to: a party that receives 30 percent of the party vote is entitled to around 30 percent of the seats in parliament.

The second vote is the riding vote and is less important to the overall composition of parliament. With the riding vote electors choose the representative that they would like to represent their riding, which are retained as single member districts. The candidate with the most votes in the riding wins the seat, as per the FPTP system.

Determining who is elected is a multi-step process. First, the number of seats that each party is entitled to is calculated using a PR distribution formula. Next, all candidates who win a riding are declared elected; winning a riding guarantees a seat in the parliament. All remaining seats that a party is entitled to are then allocated to candidates based on their order on their party's list. For example, in a parliament of 338 seats a party that won 40 percent of the party vote would be entitled to around 135 seats, depending on the distribution formula. If candidates won 90 ridings for the party all would be declared elected and the first 45 candidates on the party list would fill the remaining seats.[1] In cases where a party wins more riding seats than their party vote entitles them to, parliament is expanded by the appropriate number of seats for that session and returns to its normal size at the next election.

The greatest advantage to MMP is that it merges the best of proportional representation and FPTP: proportionality and riding-level representation. MMP takes the ability of proportional representation

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1   In MMP systems candidates often run in ridings and on the party list. In cases where a candidate wins a riding and is on the party list they are eliminated from the party list and the next candidate moves up one ranking.

to ensure that all votes count and the increased likelihood of parliaments reflecting their citizenry and marries it with the existence of single member electoral districts which can make residents feel connected to political processes and that they have an MP that is accountable to them. Additionally, because the party vote is the most important to the composition of parliament voters may feel that they can choose the riding candidate that would best represent them rather than voting along party lines. In turn, this could create incentives for riding MPs to better serve their constituents in order to improve their chances of re-election. These benefits may increase political trust.

Like proportional representation systems MMP has the disadvantage of potentially removing control over which candidates are elected from voters which may decrease political trust. A second disadvantage is that MMP creates two types of MPs: riding MPs and list MPs. Riding MPs may be perceived as more legitimate than list MPs owing to their success in being elected in individual ridings; by contrast list MPs may be perceived as being accountable only to their party. This was seen to some extent in New Zealand, both among voters and MPs themselves (Barnes, 2010).

MMP is also sometimes perceived as a complex and confusing system owing to voters having two votes. For voters to exert maximum influence it is important for them to know that the party vote is the more important of the two. This may be a more complex undertaking than simply choosing a single candidate to support or ranking preferred candidates.

Designing an electoral system with health in mind

Canada is a large and diverse country and our electoral system should be able to represent the depth and breadth of Canada and Canadians. But electoral systems are more than a mechanism about which we think of once every four years as we cast a ballot. Electoral systems are fundamental to our democratic institutions and while we may vote only once every four years, how those votes are counted matters for the governing of our country every day in-between. Too often when we discuss electoral reform we limit ourselves to thinking of how particular systems may advantage or disadvantage specific parties or candidates. But, as this think piece shows, electoral systems can influence political trust, social capital and health.

Each of the electoral systems described in this think piece have benefits and limitations in their potential for implementation in Canada. From the perspective of building political trust and health it is likely that proportional representation offers the greatest opportunity to improve social capital and health in Canada. Proportional representation systems tend to elect a more diverse range of parliamentarians from a more diverse range of political parties. These systems also value each vote more or less equally, thereby giving all Canadians a genuine opportunity to influence electoral outcomes.

Given Canada's longstanding tradition of electing MPs in single member districts it is also worth considering a hybrid system like MMP. MMP offers the major advantage of treating votes equally with regard to the overall composition of the parliament while also ensuring that each riding has a single elected official who can continue to handle constituency affairs. Choosing a system like MMP may particularly enhance political trust as parliaments become more diverse and individual voters have a stronger voice in determining election outcomes while continuing to have a riding MP who can advocate for and be held accountable by the community.

The commitment from the federal government to establish an all-party committee to review electoral

reform options is an important step forward. Given the centrality of electoral systems to how citizens are affected by political institutions it is important for the parliamentary committee to have a broad mandate to consider electoral reform from a wider perspective than just that of different ways to count votes. The deliberations should consider how electoral systems can influence sociopolitical structures in Canada and how changes to electoral systems can affect political trust, social capital and health. We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to choose an electoral system that builds a healthy democracy and healthy Canadians.

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