



Dylan Penner



by Dylan Penner

Go Vote for **the Change You Want to See**

Our democracy is in crisis. Our rights to free speech, to protest, to vote in free and fair elections, and the right to not be subjected to widespread, invasive and unjustifiable state surveillance are all being threatened. The erosion of these democratic rights has brought us to a tipping point in the relationship between the people and our government.

It's time for change and this is our opportunity to choose a path to a different future.

The fixed date of the next federal election is about five months away. However, Stephen Harper could

break his own election law and call the vote much sooner if he thinks the Conservative party can win.

The outcome of the election will likely depend on the answer to two questions: how effective can we be at countering voter suppression and how can we significantly increase voter turnout?

Why so many people aren't voting

In the last election 6,200 votes in 14 ridings meant the difference between majority and minority government. Meanwhile, more than 9.4 million eligible Canadian voters didn't cast

Lawyer Steven Shrybman, Jessica McCormick of the Canadian Federation of Students, and Garry Neil from the Council of Canadians held a press conference on Parliament Hill in February announcing the filing of more than 2,000 pages of evidence in the Charter challenge against the so-called "Fair" Elections Act.

ballots, including two out of three young people.

It's not about apathy, it's about issues. Many potential voters are tuning out of electoral politics because they don't see the issues that matter to them reflected in the political discussions. Many others want to vote, but face systemic barriers that deter, or even prevent them from doing so.

Voter turnout has been in decline since 1988, but the current federal government has made a particular contribution to decreasing voter turnout by taking voter suppression to a whole new level.

In 2011, we now know there was an orchestrated campaign across hundreds of ridings to mislead people about the location of their polling stations in order to prevent them from voting. A Federal Court justice found that the source of the information used for these calls was the Conservative party database. Rather than assist authorities in finding the ringleaders of this election fraud, the Conservative party has refused to disclose who had access to the database. The perpetrators remain at large.

The 2011 election fraud was then used as a pretext to introduce the so-called “Fair” Elections Act. But instead of reducing voter suppression and election fraud, the act will make it easier for both to occur. On top of this, the government has introduced Bill C-50, which will extend voter suppression provisions of the “Fair” Elections Act to Canadians living abroad.

The Council of Canadians worked with other groups across the country to defeat some of the worst parts of the “Fair” Elections Act. However, several sections remain in the legislation that could disenfranchise tens of thousands of voters. We’re challenging those provisions in court with the Canadian Federation of Students and three individual voters.

What’s at stake in this election?

The Conservatives’ record speaks for itself: gutting public services like health care and home mail delivery; attacking workers’ rights; decimating environmental protections while expanding support for the tar sands and fracking; silencing opposition voices, including whistleblowers and charities; undermining the right to water and the rights of Indigenous peoples; sabotaging international agreements; promoting corporate rights pacts like CETA; expanding war and militarism; and much, much more.

The Council of Canadians is non-partisan and therefore won’t be supporting any specific candidates or parties, but we do want a government that won’t undermine our most fun-

damental rights. This election is our collective opportunity to change the political landscape for the better.

Changing the rules of the game

It’s time for change. We need a government that champions policies that reflect our communities’ priorities.

That change starts with this election, but at a deeper level we need to change the system that disenfranchises millions who don’t get a vote in the decisions that impact their daily lives. We need to deepen democratic participation – voting once every few years is just the beginning of a more participatory politics.

We need to change the relationship between the general public and the people we choose to represent us in Parliament. There are two important ways we can do this.

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First, we need to ensure the majority of those elected commit to much-needed democratic voting reform to replace our outdated first-past-the-post voting system. Fair Vote Canada’s Declaration of Voters’ Rights is an important organizing tool for building the necessary momentum to make this a reality.

Second, it’s time for a “people’s platform.” Political parties’ platforms, which outline what each party commits to do if elected, are key features of every election. A peoples’ platform would give people a voice and make it clear what we want from those seeking office.

Building grassroots power

By the time you read this, the Council of Canadians will be in the midst of a series of democracy town halls from coast to coast. These important events will help educate and inform,

and give people the tools they need in the lead-up to the next election. Following the town halls, we will organize local vote canvass teams, building on the important groundwork that has already begun with our “Game Changers Tour” that has been reaching out to young voters. We hope you will consider taking the Voter Pledge and joining your friends and neighbours to canvass your communities.

If you and everyone reading this issue of *Canadian Perspectives* get just two people who weren’t planning on voting to take the pledge to vote in the next federal election, it could increase the number of ballots cast by tens of thousands.

Deepening our capacity for community organizing can lead to important victories on key campaigns locally, regionally and federally. And so, regardless of which party wins the next election, we will have a stronger grassroots movement that has clearer common goals and more capacity to challenge and change the status quo.

Dylan Penner is the Democracy Campaigner for the Council of Canadians.

Taking Action for Fair Elections

The Council of Canadians, the Canadian Federation of Students, and three individual electors have filed more than 2,000 pages of powerful evidence for our charter challenge of the so-called “Fair” Elections Act. At the time of publication, we asked for a court order to quash parts of the act that will suppress the votes of tens of thousands of qualified electors.

For the latest on this groundbreaking legal challenge visit our website at www.canadians.org/charter-challenge.

For all the latest updates on the Council of Canadians’ Democracy campaign, visit www.canadians.org/democracy.