NON-PARTISAN DECLARATION ON UTSU ELECTORAL REFORM

Executive Summary:

- Move to online voting so that commuting students, students with physical disabilities, and disengaged students can best access their right to vote
- Abandon first-past-the-post election system in favor of a preferential – "instant runoff" – system that would ensure that candidates cannot win with less than 50% of the vote
- Abolish vague, overbroad rules in the election procedures code, including the rule against "undermining the authority of the CRO." Remove the ability of the CRO to punish students for filing complains he or she unilaterally deems to be "frivolous."
- Decrease the number of signatures required for nomination of candidates for executive positions – 250 is too high. Controversies about signatures on nomination forms are useless distractions from real issues.
- Improve access to all-candidates debates. All candidates' debates should be well advertised long in advance, and they should be recorded and posted online prominently and immediately.
- Break down financial barriers to participation by candidates.
- Change the composition of the Elections and Referenda Appeals Committee to be made up of a majority of UTSU members. The final appeal in electoral disputes should not be adjudicated by a panel made up of a majority of non-UTSU members.

Introduction

No matter your politics, and no matter who you voted for in the last UTSU election, one thing is clear: it's a problem that every year, elections end up being fights over the rules of the elections themselves and over competing allegations of misconduct. Nobody benefits, least of all students, from elections that focus on procedural fights, and not on an honest debate over how best to serve the student population.

Those who have supported incumbents and those who have supported opposition candidates need to find common ground on at least one important issue: electoral reform. Let's put these issues to bed once and for all, so that UofT students can have the elections they deserve.

So, what does our electoral system need?

1) **Accessibility**

First thing's first: our election system needs to move into the 21st century. We need to move to a system of online voting so that commuting students, students with physical disabilities, and disengaged students can better access their right to vote.

Think about it - you can do everything from ordering books and pizza online, to paying for tuition, to downloading lecture slides and engaging in class participation. Online voting is a logical next step that has a proven track record of increasing voter turnout in student elections both on UofT campus and across the country. An online system can be more secure, more accessible, and less prone to human error or tampering - as elections for Governing Council and Councils at numerous Colleges have shown.

2) **Accuracy**

Our first-past-the-post voting system doesn't do enough to accurately represent the views of students. In elections where more than two candidates run, students should be able to rank their candidates in order of preference, in an "instant runoff" preferential voting system. See the link below for an explanation of

preferential, or alternative, voting:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FstA45lxgFs

This type of system would ensure that vote splitting doesn't allow one candidate to win with a share of the vote less than 50%+1. We owe it to students to make sure that our system accurately represents them.

3) **Accountability**

We need to change how our electoral officials run elections, and we need to change the rules to make candidates and officials act in a more accountable, more transparent way.

First, prohibitions against "undermining the authority of the Chief Returning Officer" should be removed from our electoral rules. It should never be against the rules to demand that electoral officials justify their decisions. Vague, over-broad rules like this give the CRO too much arbitrary authority, and are a recipe for unnecessary conflict, disagreement, and potential disqualifications. For the same reason, the CRO should no longer have the power to punish students and dismiss their claims because he considers them to be "frivolous."

Second, the threshold for nominations should be decreased. It takes more petition signatures to be nominated for UTSU President than it does to be nominated for Member of Parliament in some jurisdictions. Conflicts over a few mistakes on nomination forms have caused needless controversy, which could be corrected simply by decreasing the onerous number of signatures that candidates have to collect in order to run.

Third, we need to improve access to all-candidates debates. They should be advertised long in advance and recorded to be posted online for students who are not able to attend. Students have a right to be informed about candidates' positions on important issues.

Fourth, we need to break down financial barriers to participation by candidates. Candidates incur large debts to finance campaigns – and not all campaigns have access to outside resources from interest groups. Reimbursement for campaign expenses often takes too long, and is contingent on too many requirements, thus placing an onerous burden on candidates not backed by organizations that can fund them.

Fifth, we have to improve oversight of the CRO's decisions. We should expand the Elections and Referenda Appeals Committee to include more members from UofT. It's good to have outside monitoring of our elections, but our final court of appeal shouldn't be made up of a majority of people who don't study or work here (and under the current rules, may not even be students at all).

It is clear that a consensus for reform is both necessary and overdue. Together, we can change our electoral system for the benefit of all students. This declaration calls on all parties, including the UTSU Executive and Board of Directors, to join us in the effort to make elections at UofT more accessible, accurate, and accountable.