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Introduction: Two principles of representation

Electoral systems have a reputation for complexity. Yet throughout modern political history, there have arisen two great principles of representation around which parliamentary elections are organized, and both of these are relatively simple concepts. The first is *territoriality*, which comes to us from Britain. The basic idea was that voters in districts choose a person to represent them in a legislative assembly or parliament. Britain exported this system of representation widely to its colonies and dominions, where some variations of the concept developed. But the basic British model of representation has changed relatively little over time. In Canada, at both the federal and provincial levels, we have accepted this principle of representation as more or less the norm and have experimented hardly at all with other models or variations.

The other great principle of representation is *proportionality*, and it comes to us from continental Europe. The idea here is that legislative assemblies should reflect the composition of the societies from which they come. Hence, voters in these systems are asked to choose a *group* of representatives who will reflect their views, generally from a list of candidates presented by the various political parties. This is the most widely used electoral model in the world today, found in most of Europe as well as in many Latin American, Asian and African countries (International IDEA, 2005). Part of the reason for its popularity is its flexibility and adaptability. The choices presented to the voters can be structured in different ways — on closed or open lists, in multiple tiers (regional or national), or in varying combinations (Gallagher, 2014). But the basic principle remains the same. A parliament or legislature should accurately reflect the views of the people who chose it. Minority positions should be represented as well as those of the majority.

The rise of political parties introduced complications into both models. Under the traditional British model, voters were no longer choosing merely a local representative but a *party* representative. In proportional systems, voters came to perceive the choice presented to them as one of partisan alternatives only. Since in a proportional model, a single party rarely wins an absolute majority of legislative seats, governments tend to be formed by coalitions of two or more parties. In British style systems however, a single party often is able to form a government, even when it has not obtained a majority of the votes. In Canada, for example, the two most recent federal governments have been majority governments, even though they obtained only 39.6% and 39.5% of the votes respectively in the 2011 and 2015 elections. In these circumstances, many feel that there should be more checks operating on governments that hold such thin electoral pluralities. In proportional systems however, the opposite problem sometimes exists — coalition governments may be unable to act decisively on certain issues because of policy disagreements among the coalition partners.

Mixed models

No electoral system is perfect. Those who favour one of these models over the other have to accept certain disadvantages along with the advantages that each offers. Over time, this has led to experimentation with several alternative or hybrid models. In particular, mixed systems seek to capture the advantages offered by both the territorial and proportional models by electing some representatives based on each principle (Shugart and Wattenberg, 2000). The German system, adopted in 1949, demonstrated that these two ideas of representation could be successfully combined in a Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) model. The success of that formula has led other countries such as New Zealand and Japan to adopt variations of it. MMP was also the model proposed for Ontario by the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, but it was rejected in the 2007 referendum.

Another type of hybrid system that has received attention from reformers is the Single Transferable Vote (STV). Under this model, representatives are chosen in multi-member districts rather than single member ones, and voters are able to rank order their preferences among multiple candidates. These rankings are tabulated along with the "first choice" votes, and voters "second preferences" may determine which candidates are elected. Although the STV model has received a great deal of attention in theoretical work on electoral systems, it is not as widely used in practice as other systems. Ireland and Malta use it, and Australia employs it in Senate elections and in some local jurisdictions. STV was the model recommended by the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly, but it did not receive the specified level of support in the 2005 referendum for it to be adopted. While STV is often considered to be a variant of proportional representation, the degree of proportionality that it achieves depends largely on the size of the districts within which representatives are elected.

The case for List PR

In this brief, I wish to encourage members of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform to give serious consideration to recommending a List PR model for Canada. List PR is by far the world's most widely used electoral system. Compared to mixed systems such as MMP or hybrid models such as STV, List PR is a relatively simple voting system that is easy for voters to understand and that works efficiently in practice. It does not require a substantially larger legislature to provide effective representation, and it does not weaken or subvert any of our other political institutions and practices. Under List PR, voters cast one vote and every vote counts. Our present electoral system continues to waste votes, and to produce governments with large parliamentary majorities but narrow electoral pluralities. List PR is by far the best system on many of the principles contained in the Committee's mandate and that those committed to genuine electoral democracy value — effective representation, legitimacy, voter choice, participation, inclusiveness, integrity. Its wide usage around the world also demonstrates that it provides stable, effective, accountable government. This is not merely a theoretical argument. Because of its extensive usage in different political and social environments, the performance of List PR systems is well known and well documented. We can have confidence that this system of voting would work well in Canada, and would accomplish the objectives of better representation of citizens and a healthier and more democratic political system.

List PR has also proven itself to be by far the best system for assuring the adequate representation of women and minorities — an important issue in Canada. The current SMP (single member plurality) system performs poorly in this regard, both provincially and federally, and in the few other countries (primarily former British colonies) that use it. The Scandinavian countries on the other hand, all of which use List PR, are consistently among the best performers with regard to the representation of women (Krook, 2014). In general, parties under List PR will act strategically to assure that their lists reflect both gender balance and the racial and ethnic diversity of the constituencies in which they field candidates. We can therefore have considerable confidence that the introduction of List PR in Canada would lead to a more ethnically diverse and gender balanced parliament, more accurately reflecting our social diversity.

List PR is a flexible and adaptable system of representation, which can be tailored specifically to meet the needs of this large and diverse country. There are many different variations in use throughout the world, but this does not mean that there is no consensus on principles. Adopting List PR does not mean simply choosing another country's electoral system. Rather, it means applying well tested principles of representation to create a system more closely attuned to Canada's political and social environment. I favour a model for Canada in which a specified number of members would be elected from multi-member districts of varying sizes based on population. In a parliament of approximately the same size as the present one, the average constituency might elect 7 or 8 members. While such districts would be geographically larger than those under the present system, a model of this type would continue to provide effective local and provincial representation. Voters would be able to cast their vote either for a list of candidates nominated by each political party in the district or preferentially for any individual candidate on the list. Candidates would be nominated, as they are now, by nomination meetings held in each district. Smaller parties might be permitted to nominate a single national list if they so chose, and a national top-up tier could be added that would allow parties receiving a specified level of the national vote (perhaps 5%) to obtain representation proportionate to their total vote. Separate provisions could be made to allow Independent candidates to qualify for the ballot in a given district on a basis consistent with the current practice. Such a model is very similar to the systems used in Spain or Sweden, both of which have parliaments comparable in size to that of Canada. .

While we cannot predict all of the longer term effects that List PR might have on Canadian politics, experience elsewhere tells us that there might be one or two more political parties represented in Parliament than there are at present, that the largest party would be less dominant than it currently is under SMP, and that governments would likely be formed by coalitions of two or more parties — generally one large party and one smaller party. Under most circumstances in the large number of countries that use List PR, coalition governments are as stable as governments formed under other systems, even if a member sometimes enters or leaves the cabinet during the term of the government. They are also more accountable to Parliament on a continuing basis than the artificial “majority” governments that tend to be produced under SMP. It is possible to produce simulations of probable outcomes based on previous election results, although of course there might well be different voting patterns under List PR than those found under the present system. There would, for example, likely be less “strategic voting” under List PR than has typically occurred under SMP in recent Canadian federal elections.

While a complete electoral reform proposal should contain more than merely general principles, my proposed direction does not stand or fall on any of its specific details. The actual number of multi-member districts or average district size could be larger or smaller than suggested here. The actual district boundaries should be, as they are now, drawn by an independent Electoral Boundaries Commission. A threshold for representation could be set higher or lower than 5%, and a “top-up” tier might (as in Sweden) or might not (as in Spain) be added. The flexibility of List PR systems allows these various issues to be considered separately and on their own merits.

The level of dissatisfaction of Canadians with their political systems, federal and provincial, has been steadily rising in recent years. Although voter turnout improved in 2015, turnout has declined substantially in recent years, reaching an historic low of 59% in the 2008 federal election.. Research has consistently found that one of the reasons for declining turnout in elections is the feeling among citizens that their votes too often do not really count under the present system, or that the choices presented to them in elections are inadequate. List PR systems throughout the world consistently produce higher turnout in elections, largely for these reasons. In the 2014 election in Sweden, for example, voter turnout was 86%.

The first-past-the-post, single member plurality, electoral system, which we inherited from Britain rather than choosing for ourselves, has produced a dismal record of misrepresentation, distortion and impaired governance in both federal and provincial elections in Canada, as well as in other countries that have continued to employ this system. Its ill effects on our political system have been well known and well documented for many years (Cairns, 1968). Canada has a unique opportunity to correct one of the most glaring deficiencies of our present political system, and to greatly improve both the democratic quality of our politics and the representation of our people. I hope that the Committee will recommend a change in our electoral system change, and that it will give serious consideration to List PR, the world’s most widely used electoral system, as the best and most practical alternative to the present model.

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