

The Fast PR System for Reform of the Canadian Electoral System

By John Goodings

Summary :

- The Fast PR System is a proportional representation (PR) system. Every vote counts. But it offers significant differences from other PR systems.
- The conduct of a federal election remains unchanged, just as it was in 2015. The election rules, boundaries, ridings, constituencies and representation by an MP remain the same.
- The number of seats in the House of Commons remains the same; this is key. Using the 2015 election as an example, the Liberals won 184 seats with 39.47% of the popular vote; they get 184 total votes. The Conservatives won 99 seats with 31.91% of the popular vote. To achieve PR on legislative votes in the House, they must be given $(184/39.47) \times 31.91 = 149$ total votes; i.e. 50 additional (proportional) votes above their 99 seats. Similarly, the NDP with 44 seats and 19.73% of the popular vote get $(184/39.47) \times 19.73 = 92$ total votes, 48 additional (proportional) votes. And so on for the Bloc and the Green Party. The math is, in fact, trivial.
- Just who within a party casts the additional (proportional) votes would have to be decided. Each individual party might decide for itself, or it might be the party leadership, or the caucus might be involved. There are several possibilities.
- By leaving the total seats in the House unchanged at 338, some serious problems are avoided: there is no space difficulty with extra people nor added expense; no MPs get seats who have not run for election; no seats are available for party hacks, as sinecures or patronage appointments.
- The proliferation of small parties could be avoided by declaring a threshold of the popular vote, say 1%, for a party's proportional votes to be counted. The violation of PR is minimal.
- With any PR system, it is difficult for a party to achieve a majority government. In any case, a majority government is perceived by many to have cons as well as pros.
- The Fast PR System is easy to implement, modify or reverse, in whole or in part. It offers significant improvements over our current First-Past-The-Post System.

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Reform of the Canadian Electoral System

Here is a suggestion for Canadian electoral reform which appeared as a letter on page A14 of the Toronto Star, 2 June, 2016 by Ron Fast of Ancaster, Ontario. It makes far more sense than anything I have seen to date. I call it the "Fast PR System". His letter is reproduced immediately below.

"There is a very simple way to put proportional representation (PR) into effect. Instead of insisting that all votes be cast by live bodies, we could assign phantom votes to each party to give the proportional effect. These votes would be cast on the direction of the party leadership, not much different from what happens now.

Here is how the parliament would stack up if this process were applied to last year's election results: The Liberals have 184 seats in the present Parliament, and 38.5 per cent of the popular vote. They would have no additional votes. The Conservatives, with 99 seats and 31.9 per cent of the vote, would receive 49 additional votes, total 148. The NDP with 44 seats and 19.7 percent of the vote would receive 48 additional votes, total 92. The Bloc, with 10 seats and 4.7 percent of the vote would receive 12 additional votes, total 22. The Greens with one seat and 3.4 percent of the vote would receive 15 additional votes, total 16.

Each elected member would still represent his/her constituency. There would be no change to election rules or boundaries. There would be no extra expense or sinecure for party hacks to carry the proportional votes.

The election would come off as usual, but electors would know that their votes counted in the makeup of the parliament.

This process would be so simple that the present majority government could pass the appropriate legislation and to give it immediate effect.

Mr. Trudeau could begin to govern with a coalition, and, no longer having majority power, allow the coalition to rescind the new system if it was so inclined.

It could become an election issue and the country could decide if they liked what they had seen so far. If one party were to gain a majority of votes, it could restore the old system without serious disruption."

Ron Fast, Ancaster, Ont.

Here are the numbers in tabular form, from the Elections Canada website. (*Elections Canada gives the Liberal % V as 39.47. Fast’s number of 38.5 might be a transcription error.)

Party	Seats Won	% V of Popular Vote	Additional (Phantom) Votes	Total Votes
Liberal	184	*39.47	0	184
Conservative	99	31.91	50	149
NDP	44	19.73	48	92
Bloc Québécois	10	4.67	12	22
Green	1	3.43	15	16
Totals	338	99.21	125	463

- The “Total Votes” to achieve PR are easily calculated by multiplying $V \times 184/39.47$ (where V is the % of popular vote obtained by the party). This, of course, gives 184.00 votes = 184 seats for the winning Liberals. The other total votes are scaled to the winning Liberals by % of popular vote.

My request for opinion about Canadian electoral reform, based on Ron Fast’s letter to the Star reproduced on the previous page (the Fast PR System), was sent to approximately 50 people. As promised, I shall attempt to summarize the comments that were received. An objective here is to address the stance that the Fast PR System, with a few modifications, is superior to our present First-Past-The-Post System (FPTP).

Comments:

- With the Fast PR System (as with any PR system), it is immediately obvious to Canadians that every vote counts. This is not true with FPTP; it is arguably less obvious with a ranked ballot (RB)/instant runoff system.
- The Fast PR System relies on the assignment of “phantom votes” such that each political party has a number of votes proportional to the percentage of the popular vote it received in the last election. There was broad agreement that “additional votes” or “proportional votes” was a better term than “phantom votes”. “Proportional votes” is preferable if the party does not hold a seat in the House of Commons.
- Some people found the Fast PR System easy to understand; some found it difficult; the flawed first-past-the-post (FPTP) system is the most easily understood. Which is the easiest to sell to the Canadian public? - proportional representation (PR) or ranked ballot (RB)/instant runoff? Which is the more fundamentally democratic? Opinions differ!

- While the idea of “proportional votes” to achieve PR was widely supported, just how to cast them was seen to be more difficult. It was suggested by several that :

(a) it might be easiest and best to leave the assignment of proportional votes up to each party to decide. Fast proposed that “These votes would be cast on the direction of the party leadership, not much different from what happens now.”

But the “party leadership” could be

(b) just the party leader,

(c) the party caucus (by caucus vote?), or

(d) the shadow cabinet. Or

(e) the additional votes could be apportioned to each party member having a seat in the House.

This latter method would involve fractional votes; e.g. although a winning Liberal member would vote $184/184 = 1.000$, a Conservative member (from the table) would vote $149/99 = 1.505$; an NDP vote would be worth $92/44 = 2.091$, etc. However, the fractional vote concept bothers some individuals (and the public?) because, as was pointed out, our whole history has always been one person, one vote. On the other hand, the members casting these votes would be democratically elected. Some people were concerned about Elizabeth May’s Green vote counting for $16/1 = 16.000$, and the Bloc vote (anti-Canadian) worth $22/10 = 2.200$. But these are a natural and proper consequence of PR.

- Allied to the previous point is the problem of a party which polls an appreciable fraction of the popular vote but which does not secure a seat in the House. (This has been a Green Party dilemma in previous elections.) Who casts that party’s proportional votes in the House? Provision would have to be made for a party representative (not a sitting MP) to register the party votes, perhaps with the Speaker of the House. The problem is not very difficult.

- Other scenarios could arise, different from the table of our last election. Suppose party A gets more seats than party B, but the same % of the popular vote. Then A and B would have the same number of votes in the House. But it could happen that party A gets more seats than party B, party A forms the government, but party B has a greater % of the popular vote. Party B would have more votes on a House bill. Is this workable? It isn’t much different from the situation faced by a minority government.

- An argument often advanced against a more conventional PR system is that extra seats in the Commons are awarded to a roster of party “leading lights” (LL) who have not themselves stood and worked for election. Any awarding of extra seats was seen by many responders to be a bad idea - more seats, more offices for MPs, more expense, etc. It is also worrying that the choosing of the roster of LLs is open to abuse; people might well be chosen for the wrong reasons (party hacks, sinecures, patronage appointments). The Fast PR method avoids all of these pitfalls.

- Several responders expressed concern that any PR system encourages the proliferation of small parties, not broad in scope, but representative of special interest groups. The problem could be overcome by having a requirement for a minimum percentage of the popular vote, i.e. a “threshold” requirement. From the Elections Canada website giving the results of our last election, the green Party polled 3.43% of the popular vote; this was followed by independents/no affiliation at 0.29%, then the Libertarian Party at 0.21%, etc. A threshold of, say, 1% would eliminate the problem. A threshold violates PR, but only to a very small extent.

- Also levied at PR systems is the experience that coalition/minority governments are the rule rather than the exception. There is an expectation that it is difficult to “get things done”. On the other hand, some people like the fact that a minority government is more easily held to account. One is mindful of our recent experience with the Harper majority government.

- To a number of responders, the Fast PR System offers the powerful advantage that the electoral system remains unchanged. As Fast says, “Each elected member would still represent his/her constituency. There would be no change to election rules or boundaries.” The ridings and their representation by an MP are the same.

- Finally, the Fast PR System would be very easy to implement. It is also easy to modify or reverse. Such changes are traditionally done by establishing a special committee to suggest revisions to the rules and report their recommendations to the House of Commons.

Several people remarked that implementation of the Fast PR System does not stand a chance, even though it offers obvious advantages over FPTP. Possibly the present Liberal party will never implement a system whereby its absolute majority is lost. From the table, the Liberals control 184/338 = 54.44% of the seats but, with Fast’s PR System, only 39.47% of the total votes (i.e. their % V of the popular vote). Presumably, much can be learned from the experience of PR systems operating in other countries. Another question altogether is the relative merits of PR vs. RB (ranked ballot/instant runoff).

As promised, I am sending this summary to my original sample group and to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. I shall also send it to my own MP for Toronto-St.Pauls’s, Carolyn Bennett, Minister for Indigenous Affairs and Northern Development. In addition, it might be appropriate to forward it to Trudeau’s Special Committee on Electoral reform. I thank you for your interest.

John Goodings