A New Election Reform Proposal: The Goldilocks Approach

-by **Simon Rosenblum** [1]

A Brief to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

Electoral reform is clearly on the Canadian political agenda. Not everybody wants it but a majority seems to desire something different from the current "first past the post"[FPTP] system which frequently results in governments being elected without a popular mandate and sometimes governments even being elected in seemingly direct opposition to the will of a majority of voters. That is not healthy for a democracy and surely an electoral regime can be designed to prevent it. I would hope that we would take it as a desirable given that public policy should be delivered in as close an approximation as possible to the will of a jurisdiction's citizenry.

This said, there are two main contenders on the election reform agenda: proportional representation[PR] and ranked ballots. Both have points in their favour.PR - of which I have been an active supporter for the past thirty years - has, in any of its variants, the positive attribute of contributing to the formation of a parliament composed of political parties in amounts - more or less-equal to their share of the national vote. A ranked ballot system where voters rank their preferences in order has both its strengths and weaknesses. As regards the latter, research shows that a ranked ballot process on its own most often results in a parliament whose composition is not much different than one elected in a first past the post manner i.e. often not very proportional. But ranked ballots, I have come to appreciate, also have a plus side which is not often sufficiently appreciated.

When we vote we do so not solely - or sometimes not even mainly - to elect our political party of choice to be the government of the day. We also do so in an effort to prevent certain parties that we particularly dislike from becoming government. A ballot which allows voters to rank their choices does this more effectively than other electoral systems. In short, a ranked ballot - and only a ranked ballot - correctly I believe places value on second place preferences though they should have less value than first place preferences. Proportional representation - and likely only PR - generally results in a parliament closely reflective of the popular will.

This brings us to the obvious question: can we have a Goldilocks solution which gives us the best attributes of both PR and ranked ballots? I think we can do that and more. I have modeled a blended electoral regime which not only does precisely that but also preserves an essential aspect of first past the post. Here in broad strokes is how it would work. Canadians may well prefer to having their local member of parliament chosen in a first past the post manner. So lets continue to do so within existing electoral boundaries. Then we would use a PR/ranked ballot fusion to top up the composition of the federal parliament in an effort to ensure significant proportionality.

To do this we would take the first place preferences - as reflected on the local riding ballot - of each party [i.e. its share of the national vote] and weight it by two-thirds. Then we would do the same with second place preferences and weight them by one-third - a second place preference being worth half the value of a first place preference. Finally we would take the combined value - or in other words, the new weighted percentage of the national vote as determined by this formula - and compare it to the number of parliamentary seats that each party won directly through the local riding elections.

If, let us say, political party A elected 44 members on the local level but, on the basis of the weighted PR/ranked ballot calculation, it would have been entitled to 76 parliamentary seats, then this party's representation would be topped up by the difference. I would propose that these additional 32 MPs be selected by taking those losing party A candidates at the local riding level who had the highest percentage of the vote. This could even be regionally weighted if desired. If a political party won more seats via the first past the post riding elections than it would have won via the weighted national formula - as will be the case for those parties which benefit from FPTP - then none of these elected MPs would be unelected. The intention here is to rebalance but not delete. But, of course, this political party would not share in the distribution of top up seats as it has already received [more than] its fair share of parliamentary seats.

The result of this not particularly complex process would be a parliament not at all perfectly proportional but much more so than by maintaining the status quo. Maybe more importantly it would be

one whose composition would most assuredly prevent a situation where a political party clearly not wanted by a majority of voters could rule. Goldilocks might just be the answer that satisfies the fundamental goals and objections of all concerned.

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1. Simon Rosenblum, a Toronto based semi-retired public policy analyst and writer, has been actively involved in the Canadian political process for almost 50 years.