

Applying Proportional Representation (PR) through a Regional Weighted Voting System

Submitted by Marilyn Reid

Summary: A significant challenge for Proportional Representation advocates is to identify a PR system able to yield a high level of proportionality in provinces that have very few federal seats. Weighted Voting, which achieves proportional representation based on parliamentary votes rather than parliamentary seats, is an approach worthy of consideration.

The Weighted Voting model envisioned in this brief differs from other proposed Weighted Voting systems in that the parliamentary votes of the political parties would be weighted within provincial boundaries rather than nationally. In practice, the PR weightings assigned to MPs' votes would differ from province to province. However, the overall effect would be a proportionally represented parliament. This hybrid model incorporates the MMP concept of top-up regional seats in each province. They would be filled by strong riding candidates not elected.

This brief also favours a referendum in 2019 and details suggestions for the lead-up process.

Part A - A Regional Proportional Representation Model

Let me begin by saying how pleased I am with government's decision to consider electoral reform. I have read the different submissions to the ERRE Committee and am excited and encouraged by the creative and thoughtful proposals that are there.

For Proportional Representative (PR) supporters the dilemma is how to choose, from the many PR systems either proposed or in use, the one that will best suit Canada's unique, diverse demography.

Proportional Representation systems generally fall into three categories.

- Multi-seat riding systems that achieve varying levels of proportionality at the riding level depending on how many seats there are in the riding.
- Mixed Member Proportional systems that strive to keep the geographical integrity of single seat ridings by creating top-up seats at the regional level.
- Weighted Voting systems that weight, or scale, the parliamentary votes of MPs, thereby balancing each party's parliamentary seats with their electoral votes.

The first two PR categories might work well in heavily populated provinces, but both are, in my opinion, far less suitable for Atlantic Canada. Both could have difficulty producing meaningful proportionality in our region simply because we do not have enough seats.

For example, my province of Newfoundland and Labrador has seven seats. I believe that if we introduced a single seven-seat riding Labrador would rebel, as might other rural areas

of the province. One suggestion might be to create one single seat riding for Labrador and two three-seat ridings for the island. Three-seat ridings however, do not produce any kind of meaningful proportionality. It would be a pointless exercise.

A similar problem exists with MMP's use of regional top-up seats. My understanding is that the Law Society of Canada recommended MMP regions should have, at the very least, 11 to 12 seats. The smaller the number of seats available in regions the lower the proportionality will be.

While I can't speak for the Maritimes, I suspect that they too might have difficulties achieving a high level of proportionality with MMP and most multi-seat models. Nova Scotia has only 11 federal seats, New Brunswick 10, and PEI four. The hybrid system, Rural Urban PR, attempts to address these problems but it also has problems. I think there is a better, more accurate, less complicated way to achieve proportionality in rural Canada.

Weighted Voting

In Weighted Voting systems it is parliamentary votes rather than parliamentary seats that determine Proportional Representation. Proportionality is achieved by weighting the parliamentary votes of each party's MPs so that they match the percentage of the popular vote the party received in the election

This brief proposes a Weighted Voting system that would introduce Weighted Voting within each province. There are two advantages to this approach, in my opinion.

First, Weighted Voting applied at the national level could arguably alter the representative power of each of the provinces. For example, any application of a weighting to Liberal votes in the current parliament could be perceived as diminishing the representative power of Atlantic Canada since all the region's MPs are Liberal. There might be objections to that.

Secondly, Weighted Voting at the national level would not address problems like the current exclusion from parliament of any Atlantic Canadian Conservative, NDP or Green Party MPs.

Here's how Regional Weighted Voting would address these two concerns.

Step 1: The Creation of Top-Up Seats

How many top-up seats? Weighted voting in the current parliament would require the creation of two top-up seats in each province. This can be done either by assigning two additional seats to each province or by the redistribution of ridings within provinces.

Who gets the top-up seats? That depends on the distribution of seats in each province. For example, in the context of the present parliament, each of the four Atlantic provinces would have to assign one of the top-up seats to the Conservative Party and one to the NDP. That's because you can't weight a party's vote with nothing to attach the vote to. (Remember, the Conservatives and NDP won none of the 32 seats in Atlantic Canada)

The regional top-up seats would be given to the strongest NDP and Conservative riding candidates in each province that did not get elected. Weighting would then be applied to both riding and top-up seats to achieve Proportional Representation.

Step 2: Weighting the Parliamentary Votes

Weighting for Newfoundland and Labrador's (NL) nine MPS in the 2015 Parliament					
<u>Political Party</u>	<u>% of Vote</u>	<u>Seat Entitlement</u>		<u>Weighting Options</u>	
		<u>Under PR</u>	<u>Won (+ Top-Up)</u>	<u>Option A</u>	<u>Option B</u>
Liberals	64.489%	5.80	7	.833	1.34
Conservatives	10.3%	.93	1	.93	1.50
NDP	21.099%	1.90	1	1.90	3.04
Greens	1.032%	.09			
Other	3.003%	.27			

I have presented two options for weighting the parliamentary votes.

In Weighting Option A the number of seats each party would have received if seats were allocated based on PR principles is first calculated. In the above example, with 64.489% of the popular vote, the Liberals would have been entitled to 5.8 seats. That number is then divided by the number of seats the party actually won, which is 7, to give a weighting of .833

Party weightings will be less than 1 or more than 1 depending on whether a party got more than their fair share of the votes or less.

To explain further, every time the seven NL Liberal MPs vote in parliament, a weighting of .833 would be applied to their votes to give them an overall party weighting equivalent to 5.8 votes (.833 x 7). The one Conservative MP would have a weighting of .93 (.93 x 1) applied to his/her parliamentary vote and the one NDP MP would have a weighting of 1.90 votes (1.90 x 1). The combined total of all these weighted votes is 8.66 which approximately equals the nine seats the province would hold in parliament. The .34 difference represents the votes of the Independent and Green Party candidates who were not elected.

Weighting Option B avoids giving any MP, anywhere in the country, a parliamentary voting weight of less than 1. I've included this option because I discovered in field tests that while people logically understood why an MP might have a weighted vote in parliament of

.833 (as the Liberals do in the example below), emotionally, some dislike the idea that their MP could have a voting weight of less than 1.

For an explanation of how I arrived at Option B please see Appendix 1.

Weighting for British Columbia MPS in the 2015 Parliament							
<u>Political Party</u>	<u>% of Vote</u>	<u>Seat Entitlement</u>		<u># of Seats</u>		<u>Weighting Options</u>	
		<u>Under PR</u>	<u>Won (with Top-up)</u>	Option A	Option B		
Liberals	17	35.1%	38.6%	.91	1.46		
Conservatives	12	29.9%	27.3%	1.09	1.75		
NDP	14	26.0%	31.8%	.82	1.32		
Green Party	1	8.2%	2.3%	3.56	5.74		
Independent	-	.8%	-	-	-		

Of course, the end result for the national NDP party is the same. It all balances itself out in the end. In other words, if you apply this same procedure to every province the final result is a very high level of proportional representation for all parties in parliament.

Points for Clarification

While I have opinions, it is not the intention of this submission to precisely define how Regional Weighted Voting might work, detail by detail. However, below are questions that might be posed in exploring and clarifying the different dimensions of this voting system.

At the national level

- Which party gets the first option to try to form a government if no party got more than 50% of the vote? Should it be the party that has the most seats or the party that got the most votes?
- How do you assign national weighting to small parties that either didn't win a seat anywhere, or like the Greens, won only one seat and so are proportionally represented in only one province?
- When is it appropriate to use free or unweighted votes?

At the provincial level

- How many top-up regional seats do you assign provinces? Should it be the same number for each province and do you create them by assigning additional seats or shrinking the number of provincial ridings?
- Do you select the top-up candidates according to who got the highest number of votes in the region or who got the highest percentage of votes in the region?
- What will be the role of regional (top-up) MPs?
- Is there a way to include the North West Territories, the Yukon and Nunavut in this model? One possibility to consider is the model put forth by Brian Eddy in his submission to the ERRE committee.

Why have I chosen Regional Weighted Voting over all other PR systems?

I believe that, in general,

- Weighted Voting models give the most legitimate, accurate and verifiable results of all PR systems.
- Weighted Voting models are the least disruptive way of achieving Proportional Representation in provinces with small populations and large geographical areas, most specifically, Atlantic Canada.
- Weighted Voting can be easily implemented and maintains local representation.

I believe that Regional Weighted Voting is an improvement on the concept of weighting votes calibrated nationally because:

- Regional Weighted Voting will be perceived by voters as better reflecting regional political values.
- Regional Weighted Voting is able to address unexpected regional scenarios where parties fail to win a seat in spite of substantial voter support.
- The allocation of top-up seats to candidates that didn't quite win in their ridings gives an alternative, but limited, entry point to deserving candidates and subtly introduces the concept of sharing the electoral pie as opposed to our current winner-take-all approach, which so many people find unfair.

Part B - Should we hold a referendum on electoral reform?

I believe that something as important as electoral reform ultimately has to be taken to the people and I support holding a referendum on whether to retain our First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) system or introduce Proportional Representation.

My suggestion is a two part referendum. In Part A citizens would choose between First-Past-the-Post and Proportional Representation. In Part B those who favoured Proportional Representation would be asked to choose among two or (a maximum of) three models.

You will note that I have not included Alternative Voting in referendum options, essentially because [Alternative Voting heavily favours the Liberal Party](#)¹. That bias would be unfair to other parties and, most importantly, to the voters who support them. Above all, Canada has to have a voting system that is fair to everybody.

With respect to the referendum process I have three recommendations.

1. The referendum should not be held before 2019. It could be included in the next federal election. Any referendum held before then would, in my opinion, be premature.
2. The two year lead-in time to the referendum needs to include a full public campaign designed to maximize public participation. That campaign should include educational initiatives, particularly within the high schools, extensive publicity, regional citizens' assemblies, outreach packages to existing community groups and so much more.
3. While civil society groups could be an important component in the implementation of the above, it is essential that governments, both federal and provincial, take a leadership role and participate fully in the process of educating the public on what they are voting for and what the ballot would look like.

Concluding Statements

I want to commend the Liberal Government for the decision to embark upon the electoral reform process. This is an immense and important undertaking.

My primary motivation for submitting a brief on Weighted Voting was the recognition that the dominant PR models like MMP, STV and other Party List systems all too often do not address, or even acknowledge, the special geographic attachment felt by many rural Canadians to their particular ridings. Furthermore, because of possible constraints on the number of seats that will be made available, the implementation of these models might not even achieve meaningful proportionality in some regions.

I would hope, therefore, that in deciding what is the best electoral system for Canada, we do not restrict ourselves to "Made in Canada" versions of other countries' systems. Canada is both the second largest country in the world territorially and one of the least densely populated. It's a mistake to assume that what might work in Germany or New Zealand or Ireland will work equally well here with just a few adaptations.

Occam's Razor suggests that the simplest solution is often the best. In my opinion, it would be short-sighted to not seriously consider new PR concepts like Regional Weighted Voting, simply because no other country has implemented a similar model.

With respect to the thorny question of whether to hold a referendum or not, I understand there is the perception that referendums don't work well, particularly because voters remain disengaged and ultimately unfamiliar with what they are supposed to be voting on. However, in the case of the Ontario and British Columbia referendums, I would argue that was the fault of governments who took a "hands-off" approach to the process leading up to the referendums.

Civil society groups simply do not have the resources or media access to reach out to fellow citizens on a question as large as electoral reform. And so, I believe that, having embarked on this electoral reform journey it is essential that government participates fully right to the end of the journey. It's a process that cannot be rushed!

That's it. I thank the Electoral Committee for giving me the opportunity to submit my perspective on electoral reform. You have been given an enormous task and I wish you wisdom, patience, and stamina in the fulfilment of this responsibility.

Marilyn Reid
Conception Bay South, NL

References:

1. *Change to preferential voting would benefit Liberals.*, Eric Grenier for CBC News, <http://www.cbc.ca/m/touch/politics/story/1.3332566>

Appendix

Here is the method used to assure that every MP (or party) across the country receives a weight of at least 1.

STEP 1:

I looked for the political party with the highest share of all MPs relative to its share of the popular vote in all provinces. This was determined by dividing the percentage of seats (MPs) won by each party in a province by the percentage of the provincial vote which that party received. In the 2015 federal election the most advantaged party was the Liberal Party in New Brunswick. The New Brunswick Liberal Party won all 10 seats with just 51.6% of the popular vote.

STEP 2:

Assume two top-up seats were assigned to New Brunswick. That would mean that the Liberal Party won 83.3% of the seats. According to the conventional method for weighting, the New Brunswick Liberal Party would receive a weighting of .62 ($51.6\% / 83.3\%$)

STEP 3:

Because we want no party to receive a weighting of less than 1 let's assume that we give the New Brunswick Liberals a weighting of 1. We do that by dividing 1 by .62 to give a weighting of 1.61. Every party across the country must be scaled by the same factor.

Thus, if a party in Saskatchewan has a conventional weighting of .9 their weighting will be changed by multiplying .9 by 1.61. This scaling will be applied to every party in every province.

What is the end result? The parliamentary votes of MPs are increased but not their seats. The end result is proportional representation.