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Canada's electoral reform initiative

The Canadian government is currently undertaking the initial process of electoral reform which consists of gathering information and ideas. An all party committee of sorts has been created to examine the possibilities and ramifications of the various systems of voting and to make a recommendation to parliament. This is arranged through community meetings, online surveys, and online submissions of arguments by individuals or groups. Broadly speaking there are two types of government representation: the winner take all 'plurality' systems such as Canada's "first past the post" [FPTP] system; and the various forms of proportional representation as used by most of the world.

One of the side issues other than the kind of system is that of whether voting should be mandatory. This would not be a problem as long as "None of the above" were a choice, but a purposeful spoil of ballot also works. It then needs to be considered if there would be consequences: negative, as in a \$20 tax fine; or positive, as in a \$20 tax benefit. Neither would influence those totally disaffected by society as a persuasion to vote. With the Liberal government's current positive attitude towards First Nations a mandatory ballot could well pose problems of 'nation to nation' considerations.

Another side issue is whether to have a referendum on a committee selected method. As noted below this could result in strong partisan politics advocating for or against a given system, but is generally more democratic than having a strictly parliamentary debate on the issue. In contrast, it could be argued that the last general election held this as a promise so a referendum would simply be redundant.

The main issues concern the kind of system that is to be recommended by the committee.

The FPTP systems generally allow a political party with sometimes considerably less than half the vote to have a majority of representatives in government. Additionally, a larger but still less than half the vote count results in a large voting majority in government. This system is one that has aided and abetted (plagued?) the party system in Canada throughout its history. Currently it is quite helpful to a united right Conservative party as they benefit in significant areas from a vote split between the somewhat left NDP and the somewhat more central Liberals.

An alternative or ranked voting system requires a majority of votes for the candidate but still is not proportional. A ranked system favours the Liberals in certain respects as a result of Canadian trends in voting: second and third votes/opinions tend to flow from Conservatives to Liberal or from NDP to Liberal but not from NDP to Conservative and seldom from Liberal to Conservative. When facing a united Conservative party in ridings where there is no clear majority, the benefits of ranking would generally accrue to the Liberals.

The most democratic form of government, not without its own limitations, is some form of proportional system wherein the representatives are elected/appointed according to as best a balance as can be determined from the overall percentage vote. Usually there is a low threshold that must be achieved in order to be recognized as a party in the proportional system. Variations of this kind of system are used by the greater majority of nations.

One of the limits for some people is the common end result of having coalition governments. The argument against that is the old "stability of government" issue, used mostly by the Conservatives with mixed results. However, statistically there are just as many elections held with majority governments as with minority governments. Coalitions tend to force governments to work more for the people rather than for themselves or their cronies.

Many Canadians, while they like democracy, want democracy 'light'. That is they are content with voting once every four years, and seldom wish to explore government and political information beyond that, relying on the media and pollsters for their information at the approach of an election.

The latter is the real factor against democracy. As long as corporate interests, corporate media, big money players and their like are able to 'persuade' the electorate through misleading advertising and polls, and to 'persuade' the representatives with 'contributions' a true democracy will not form.

Ultimately at the highest level, as long as so called "free" trade agreements, or "investment protection" agreements are in existence, there can be no democracy. Sovereign nations are increasingly less powerful than the corporations that are protected by these agreements and that can override national laws and policies. Citizens and governments cannot argue against the corporations except through tribunals arranged, managed, and undisclosed by the corporations.

There is no democracy in a global system powered by the corporations. We can only hope that a truly representative government would renegotiate or abrogate those treaties. But coming back from that, some form of proportional system will work the best for Canada domestically.

The strongest form of proportional representation is the mixed-member proportional (MMP). It allows for direct representation within a riding at the same time providing for a legislative representation for different parties based on their overall national percentage of vote. The main concern of most disaffected voters is the "my vote does not count." The MMP system allows for all votes to count, if not directly for a candidate, then overall for a party of choice. It also allows a voter to vote for a representative from one party while actually voting for another party - a good way to help keep local nominating sessions more balanced.