

# Issues of Representation in Coalition Governments

Report to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

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## Summary

### A Focus on Coalition Governments

- Reforming the Canadian electoral system from a first-past-the-post electoral system to possibly a proportional representation (PR) electoral system not only changes how votes are translated into seats but also influences significantly the government formation process.
- In particular, PR systems generally produce coalition governments after elections. Coalition governments differ from single-party majority governments in the extent to which they represent citizens.

### A Focus on the Correspondence Between Citizen Policy Preferences and Public Policies

- Under PR electoral systems, citizens are generally better represented in legislatures than under first-past-the-post systems due to an accurate translation of votes into seats.
- Representation, however, is not only about votes-seats correspondence and its associate consequences. Representation is also and maybe more importantly about the correspondence between citizen policy preferences and the policies governments implement.
- *Building on the most recent studies in political science and political economy, I explain, first, that governments' policy positions are generally as close to citizen preferences under a first-past-the-post electoral system than under a PR electoral system when governments form after elections.*
- *Importantly, however, I explain that when it comes to the relationship between what citizens want in terms of policies and what citizens get from governments, citizens are better represented in first-past-the-post electoral systems than in PR electoral systems.*

### Recommendation

- Accordingly with the principles of *effectiveness and legitimacy* considered by the *Special Committee on Electoral Reform*, I recommend the Committee the adoption of an electoral system that favours the formation of single-party majority governments. First-past-the-post and alternative vote electoral systems generally produce single-party majority governments.

## 1 A Focus on Coalition Governments

The objective of the report is to discuss issues of representation in coalition governments. Electoral systems have meaningful impacts on the democratic life of a country among which the type of governments that forms after elections is a crucial one. It is well-known that proportional representation (PR) electoral systems favour the formation of coalition governments after elections. This is because no party generally gathers a majority of legislative seats. Parties, therefore, must negotiate with each other in order to form a government.

Given that different electoral systems that might produce coalition governments are under consideration by the *Special Committee on Electoral Reform*, the report informs the Committee members on issues of representation with respect to coalition governments. Importantly, how parties in coalition governments manage to achieve citizen representation differs from single-party majority governments (the type of governments that Canadians have experienced most of the time).

In the next sections, I cover how parties and government achieve representation in coalition governments under PR systems based on the most recent state of the literature in political science and political economy. In particular, my focus is on the effects of coalition governments on *substantive representation*. Substantive representation consists in the relationship between what citizens want in terms of policies and what they get from governments.

## 2 A Focus on the Correspondence Between Citizen Preferences and Public Policies

Representative democracy consists in a series of linkages. First, citizens express their policy preferences in casting a vote for a party/candidate.<sup>1</sup> Second, votes are translated into legislative seats. Third, legislative seats are translated into governments. Fourth, governments implement policies. How citizens are represented in the democratic process may be evaluated at each stage of this chain. PR electoral systems favour an accurate translation of votes into seats. This has the benefit of producing legislatures that better reflect the diversity of citizen preferences (Lijphart, 1999; Powell, 2000; Golder and Stramski, 2010). This better representation at the beginning of the representation chain does not assure, however, better representation in terms of policies. In other words, a better accurate translation of votes into seats does not guarantee correspondence between citizen preferences and public policies. This is a crucial aspect of representation to consider when evaluating different electoral systems given that it accounts for what representatives and governments do during the mandate period. Political representation is not only about votes-seats proportionality nor who get elected. Political representation is also and maybe more importantly about whether citizen *policy preferences* get translated into *enacted policies* (Pitkin, 1967).

This relationship between government policies and citizen preferences have been studied from two different perspectives. First, scholars have examined whether the policy positions of governments that take office *after elections* better match citizen preferences under majoritarian or PR electoral systems. Empirical

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<sup>1</sup>Other factors may as well influence citizens' vote such as the evaluations of party leaders and local candidates and strategic considerations.

studies indicate that governments are as close to citizen preferences under majoritarian and PR systems. Second, scholars have examined whether governments in *between elections* implement policies that correspond to citizen preferences under majoritarian or PR electoral systems. Empirical studies indicate that governments in majoritarian systems are more prone to translate citizen preferences into enacted policies.<sup>2</sup>

### 3 Government Representation *After Elections*

#### State of the Literature: No Difference Between Majoritarian and PR systems

Elections should produce governments that are close to citizen preferences. Scholars in political science have examined thoroughly this question over the years. An empirical consensus has emerged recently underlying that majoritarian and PR electoral systems produce similar levels of government representation *after elections* (Golder and Lloyd, 2014; Ferland, 2016). In other words, governments in majoritarian and PR electoral systems represent their average citizen to about the same extent just *after an election*.

#### Reasons

To locate government positions and citizen preferences after elections, scholars generally use the left-right ideological dimension. This is an important dimension of political competition in advanced democracies. Citizen preferences on the left-right dimension generally follow a normal (bell-curve) distribution where a greater number of citizens locate themselves at the centre than at the extremes. As a benchmark for representation, the position of the *median "average" citizen* is generally selected because it is the most representative preferences of all citizen preferences (Huber and Powell, 1994). For example, if a government implements a policy to the left of the one preferred by the average citizen we could conclude that a minority of citizens (those on the left) are over-represented compared to those citizens on the right. Different mechanisms under majoritarian and PR electoral systems produce governments close to the average citizen after an election.

Majoritarian systems create distortions in the votes-seats translation. These distortions advantage bigger parties while disadvantaging smaller parties (Duverger, 1963). Bigger parties have also an incentive to locate themselves at the centre of the left-right dimension to get elected because there are more citizens located close to this position (Downs, 1957; Cox, 1990; Merrill and Adams, 2002). We thus generally observe the bigger parties to be centrist in majoritarian systems. When they are elected, these parties form most of the time single-party majority governments close to the centre of the left-right dimension. This is close to the *average citizen* and, therefore, close to citizen preferences as a whole.

Proportional electoral systems create an accurate translation of votes into seats. This proportionality makes it easier for several parties to form and compete at elections. Indeed, we generally observe a greater number of parties competing in PR systems than in majoritarian systems (Duverger, 1963; Ordeshook and Shvetsova, 1994; Clark and Golder, 2006). PR systems also decrease parties' incentives to locate themselves at the centre of the left-right dimension (Downs, 1957; Cox, 1990; Merrill and Adams, 2002). For example,

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<sup>2</sup>The term *majoritarian* electoral system is used to designate first-past-the-post plurality systems (e.g. Canada and the UK) and alternative vote systems (e.g. Australia) that generally produce single-party *majority* governments.

small extremist parties can elect representatives even if they receive a small proportion of votes.<sup>3</sup> Overall, we thus observe a greater number of parties that are dispersed politically in PR systems (Dow, 2011; Ezrow, 2011; Calvo and Hellwig, 2011). Because there is a greater number of citizens close to the centre of the political dimension, centrist parties generally receive a greater proportion of votes and seats. Because of the greater votes-seats proportionality of PR systems, however, no parties generally receive a majority of legislative seats which requires, therefore, parties to negotiate together in order to form coalition governments. Centrist parties in PR systems will generally be the *formateur* with the responsibility of negotiating with other parties to form a government. The policy position of centrist parties pull the government position close to the *average citizen* but the positions of the other parties in a coalition generally pull the government position away from her. On average, we observe that governments which form in PR systems are as close to their citizen preferences than governments in majoritarian systems (Golder and Lloyd, 2014; Ferland, 2016; Blais and Bodet, 2006).

## 4 Government Representation *Between Elections*

### State of the Literature: Better Representation Under Majoritarian Systems

Governments should implement policies that correspond to citizen preferences. Scholars in political science have recently begun examining this question. Most studies indicate that governments in majoritarian systems better translate citizen preferences into policies (Wlezien and Soroka, 2012; Soroka and Wlezien, 2016; Coman, 2015; Ferland, 2015).

### Reasons

While government representation *after elections* is similar under majoritarian and PR electoral systems, things may change between elections. In particular, citizens may change their policy preferences. Unexpected issues may also arise that call for government actions. In such instances, governments may react in adjusting their policies. In doing so, citizen preferences are better represented. Scholars have thus examined whether governments may adjust and implement policies that match changing citizen preferences in majoritarian and PR systems. To understand why governments better translate citizen preferences into policies in majoritarian systems than PR systems, we must understand the *electoral incentives* that governments have to do so but also their *ability* to act on those incentives.

### Electoral Incentives

Governments in majoritarian systems have greater electoral incentives to implement or to change their policies to better match changing citizen preferences than governments in PR systems. As explained above, majoritarian electoral systems generally produce single-party majority governments. If citizens change their preferences, this type of government has strong interests to adjust to that change. Presumably, single-party

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<sup>3</sup>Obviously, some thresholds could limit these parties to gain legislative representation. It is still easier - on average - for small parties to enter the political competition in PR systems than in majoritarian systems.

majority governments want to get re-elected and implementing policies that match citizen preferences is a good way to achieve this objective. Obviously, things are not perfect and governments will not always adopt policies that match exactly citizen preferences in majoritarian systems but governments have strong incentives to do so.

Things are much more complicated in coalition governments under PR systems. While centrist parties have incentives to follow citizen preferences (i.e. the average citizen), this is not the case for all parties in a coalition. The reason is quite simple. Centrist parties receive votes from centrist/average citizens. Non-centrist parties do not. Non-centrist parties receive votes from citizens that are located in between the centre and the extremes and have the responsibility of representing them. Importantly, parties are *accountable* to those citizens they represent and get support from. Indeed, non-centrist parties in coalition governments are not necessarily accountable to centrist citizens.

For example, imagine a coalition government forms by the Liberals, the NDP and the Green party. Presumably, each party is supported by different groups of citizens. Liberals' voters are generally much more centrist (and similar to the average citizen) than those of the NDP and the Green party. When it comes to policy-making between elections each of these parties prefers to implement policies that correspond to those their supporters favour and on which they campaign on. In other words, if the Green and the NDP were only supporting and implementing policies corresponding to those proposed by the Liberals, Green and NDP supporters may want to punish their party at the next election. Admittedly, Green and NDP supporters are expecting policies that match what the Green and NDP candidates advocated for during the electoral campaign. There are thus conflicting interests in coalition governments with respect to whom each party has incentives to represent when it proposes and implements policies. Overall, not all parties have incentives to represent the preferences of the average citizen. These conflicting interests generally undermine *government representation between elections* in PR systems.

## **Ability**

In addition to the electoral incentives to implement policies that match citizen preferences, governments must have the ability to act on these incentives (Ferland, 2015; Soroka and Wlezien, 2016; Coman, 2015). This relates to a government's capacity to change policies. This ability to change policies is significantly influenced by the number of parties in government. In particular, it is more difficult to change policies as the number of parties in cabinet increases (Tsebelis, 2002). This is because each party in a coalition government may veto - to some extent - a change in policy it disagrees with.

Keeping in mind the above discussion, it is easy to see that some parties may veto changes in policies that correspond with the preferences of the average citizen. Imagine, for instance, that an economic crisis emerges under the same Liberal, NDP and Green coalition than above. Citizens may, presumably, favour some spending cuts during such a period. Presumably, the Liberal Party may be more inclined to implement such policies but it is unlikely that the NDP and the Green parties will favour such a proposition. The latter could thus veto the proposed spending cuts of the Liberals. This is only an example but we could think of similar scenarios across policy areas. Overall, coalition governments have less the ability to change policies than single-party majority governments during their term in office which undermines, therefore, their ability

to implement policies which correspond to citizen preferences.

## 5 Conclusion and Recommendation

One of most common critique associated with first-past-the-post majoritarian electoral systems is their lack of political representation and especially with respect to how votes are not accurately translated into legislative seats. This disproportionality may indeed affect negatively the representation of women and minority groups in legislatures as well as the diversity of citizen policy preferences.

This is, however, only one aspect of political representation. Representation is also and maybe more importantly about the correspondence between citizen policy preferences and government policies. The most recent studies in political science indicate that single-party majority governments in majoritarian electoral systems favour this aspect of representation to a greater extent than coalition governments in PR systems.

Accordingly with the principles of *effectiveness and legitimacy* considered by the *Special Committee on Electoral Reform*, I recommend the Committee the adoption of an electoral system that favours the formation of single-party majority governments. First-past-the-post and alternative vote systems are such type of electoral systems that generally produce single-party majority governments.

I will conclude this report with a personal comment. No electoral system maximizes all the democratic features that we value and want to promote in our Canadian political institutions (representation, accountability, simplicity, civic engagement, inclusion, etc.). The choice of an electoral system involves trade-off between different values. In combining different institutions, however, it may be possible to favour as many of these values as possible. From my perspective, the current discussion about the reform of the Canadian electoral system should also consider the reform of the Senate and its rules of nominations (election). If one of the objectives of the electoral reform is to give citizens more *voices* in the Parliament, this could be achieved in reforming the Senate following the introduction of a proportional electoral system. This would have the benefit of increasing the diversity of citizen preferences in the Parliament while not encouraging the formation of coalition governments as it would be the case with the introduction of proportional electoral rules in the House of Commons.

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