

Popular Representation

by Marc-André Brzustowski

preface:

Leading alternatives for proportional representation, such as Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) and Single Transferable Vote (STV) work on the premise that an electoral system made up of single member ridings can never allow for proportional representation. This is true only if we adhere to the assumption that every elected MP has one vote in Parliament and all of those votes are equal. If instead we allow for variable votes in the House of Commons, then the existing system of winner-take-all single member ridings can easily be modified to allow for accurate and precise proportional representation. The problem of proportional representation does not lie in our ability to measure and register people's choices at the ballot box. Rather, it is in the accurate expression of that collective choice in Parliament that our system fails.

As such, a system of weighted votes in the House of Commons would allow Canada to keep its current single member riding system and have proportional representation at the same time. Votes for any party in any riding would count nationally, as long as that party could win at least one seat in the House and regardless which party won the riding in question. Changes relating to official party status and the possibility of granting commons seats to parties that don't elect candidates in any riding — but still meet the minimum vote requirement for entry to the House — would enhance fairness and promote voter equality.

While the form of our elections would remain essentially unchanged, the content would be radically different. By accurately reflecting the popular vote in the Commons, a weighted vote system would bring each voter closer to equality regardless of where they cast their vote. The share of the popular vote — rather than the number of MPs elected — would determine the weight of a party's voice in the Commons.

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A System of Weighted votes in the House of Commons

A **system of weighted votes** in the House of Commons would do much to democratize our current electoral system. As it stands, the Liberal Party — having received 39.5% of the popular vote in the last Federal election — holds 54% of the votes in the House of Commons. The Green Party, having gained the backing of 3.4% of the electorate, currently holds only 0.3% of the votes in the House of Commons. A weighted vote, calibrated to bring any given party's House of Commons vote in line with its share of the popular vote, would much more accurately reflect the democratic will, enhancing the moral legitimacy of each sitting MP, bolstering the relevance of Federal Parliament and potentially opening the public discourse to a wider array of political opinion and debate.

The weight of any given MP's vote in the House of Commons would be determined by a simple formula — $a \times b \div c$ — where a is the percentage of the popular vote won by their party, b represents the total number of seats in the House of Commons, and c is the seat total for their party in the last election. Using this formula, each Liberal Party seat in the House of Commons would be worth 0.72 of a vote. With 184 of the 338 seats in the House, a weighted vote of 0.72 per seat would give the Liberals a total of 133.51 votes, or 39.5% of the votes in the House, the same percentage as their share of the popular vote. Using the same formula the single Green Party seat would be worth 11.49 votes out of 338 — or 3.4% of the Commons vote— matching that party's share of the popular vote.

Under a system of weighted votes, the current “winner-take-all single member riding” form of our electoral system could remain essentially intact. In the interest of further democratization, however, an important change would be the granting of official party status to any political formation that elected at least one representative in one federal riding in the country. This would minimize wasted votes and likely promote greater participation at the ballot box. Elections Canada would need to continue and improve on the work of creating and redistributing ridings to accurately reflect population density and growth, but the system of weighted votes in the House would be superimposed on the form of the existing electoral system — radically changing the content.

This system of weighted votes could be extended to parliamentary committees and even to the Senate where each official party in the House of Commons would have at least one senator. Members of the Upper Chamber could still be appointed to maintain regional representation, but could be chosen from lists of individuals nominated by the parties represented in the Commons. Regardless of how an individual came to sit in the Senate, the weight of their vote would correspond to their party's share of the popular vote in the most recent federal election.

Following the logic of fairness, democratic representation could be further enhanced with another simple change whereby any political formation which received at least the same number of votes as the MP elected with the least number of votes would receive a seat in the Commons with its vote weighted accordingly. This would create two different kinds of MPs, those that represented geographic constituencies and those that represented parties that had not won any ridings but had garnered at least as many votes as the sitting MP with the lowest vote count. Since that is the *de facto* bar of admission to the Commons — and is determined at each election only after the votes have been counted — it would seem reasonable that any party that reached it would have a legitimate claim to a seat in the House. Budgets and responsibilities would correspond to the differences in the type of MP, though each would have the same kind of voice in the House — a weighted vote to ensure accurate representation of the popular vote in the Commons.

These changes would do much to ensure greater democratic representation, likely bolstering democratic participation in the process while leaving the form of our current electoral system essentially unchanged. The vote of each citizen would become more equal while the vote of each MP would be weighted to reflect political reality — their party's share of the popular vote.

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