

## **Riding's Choice Hybrid Electoral System**

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### **Summary**

I propose a hybrid system with some single-seat ridings and some multi-seat ridings, with voters in ridings able to choose which.

### **Introduction**

Many of the desirable characteristics of an electoral system are contradictory. There is no way to maximize localness and proportionality at the riding level – to gain proportionality has some cost to localness. Similarly voting complexity can add meaning to votes, but at the expense of simplicity, and having multiple representatives gives a constituent an option when dealing with an MP, but it also means the MPs don't have the same duty to represent and support all constituents.

There are tradeoffs and drawbacks to all electoral systems. You have the challenging task of not only picking one proposal out of the noise, but to try and rally everyone to it.

### **Referendum**

I assert that there must be a national referendum on electoral reform. Legitimacy and Integrity are not just principles of the electoral system we want, but of the process of choosing one.

It is unacceptably dangerous to change the foundation of democratic engagement without a direct vote of the people. There are electoral reform options that favour larger existing parties so there is unavoidable bias even in parliamentary consensus. Precedents are important in our system so we can't unleash future governments to change the system independent of the people.

Some fear a referendum for its divisiveness. This is not the case in this situation. If there is ever a case for a referendum, it is on how democracy works. Some proponents of electoral change are now shying away from demanding a referendum. They want a decision pulled out of the chatter and forced onto the country because they fear that a referendum will fail. Instead, we just need to be smarter about implementing change.

This referendum needs to present one change option – to have multiple options would mean having two referenda (expensive and slow), or selecting a new electoral system with a plurality vote, which does not develop legitimacy.

**Recommendation #1: Electoral Reform needs to be decided in a referendum in order to have legitimacy and integrity, and to safeguard future government action.**

What follows is not just about what system is theoretically best, but winning over the public to this change initiative so that a referendum can succeed.

### **Making Every Vote Count**

The strongest mantra that seems to be repeated on electoral reform is "make every vote count". This is usually assumed to mean some form of proportional representation (PR). To some that means that every vote contributes to a winner. In all forms of PR, however, there is at least the potential for votes that don't produce winners. A full nation-wide voting district PR system comes close – a vote for a party that reaches the threshold to have an MP will give the feeling that their vote counted. The same is generally the case with single transferrable vote (STV). But in both cases there are surplus votes that weren't necessary to have the outcome that is achieved – not every vote is a kingmaker. I think most people generally understand this, and I think many people who say they want every vote to count mean that they want to be able to vote the way they really want to vote, and have that vote have a fair and meaningful chance of contributing to the outcome they want. In that case, just about every voting system except First Past the Post (FPTP) is a dramatic improvement.

### **Stability and Proportionality**

Stability is front and centre on the minds of many voters. Stability is a foundation of Effectiveness and Legitimacy. People who favour stability tend to want to see majority governments, or at least strong minorities. They tend to therefore favour majoritarian systems over PR. They don't want to see weak minorities, potentially with a Prime Minister from a lead party with 29% of the popular vote (especially when so many people want change in order to get away from having winning parties with 39% of the vote). People fear PR might cause decision-making paralysis and back-room deal-making where the government we get is different than any of the options we had to vote for.

After minority governments have run their course the electorate seems to reach a point where they want a majority again. Stability is important enough that many people do not want to leap off into a radically (in their minds) different voting system, even if they aren't particularly happy with the current one, because they can't see what the effects will on voters, on the outcome of elections, and on the governance we receive. This is evident in the recent proposals to change voting systems that were voted down provincially. It will be very hard to convince most of the voters for whom stability is a significant concern to vote for change, regardless of the merits explained or charts presented.

Many of PR's issues can be mitigated. PR with vote thresholds or small voting districts, hybrid (with some single and some multi-member ridings) and mixed member proportional (MMP) systems are all generally proportional but limit proportionality in some manner on purpose. Proportionality is not a yes or no proposal, but a matter of degree. Limiting it can prevent extensive proliferation of parties and the carving up of the electorate into smaller pieces. It is possible to design PR in such a way to try and mitigate the other concerns of the stability-conscious as well, though not make them all go away entirely. Even with full mitigation fears will remain, however; perception is reality when selling change.

There are also benefits to minority governments in terms of collaboration rather than

confrontation, an element also associated with attracting a wider diversity of candidates into the political realm. Proponents of PR argue that stability with majorities is a short-term effect negated by policy lurch as governments change. Looking beyond recent history we have not seen terrible instability from policy lurch, but while it isn't a plague, it isn't negligible, and is less of an issue with minority governments.

There is potentially a win-win compromise position, where artificial majorities like we currently have are greatly diminished, but near-majorities are frequent, making for one clear lead party in coalition building (either formal or on an issue-by-issue basis, as is often the case when we have minorities now). With an increased number of smaller parties, as is possible with PR, the lead party might have more potential partners to choose from, increasing stability and preventing one-issue or extremist parties from gaining inappropriate clout. Managed proportionality is best able to achieve this.

There are clearly costs to legitimacy and voter engagement if the outcome of an election does not seem related to the votes cast. While many Canadians do not feel our elections are unfair, some do. We are certainly towards the end of the spectrum in recent elections where there is enough of a difference between popular vote and seat count to feel less democratic and fair. Increased proportionality is an improvement and a necessary one to achieve full marks for Legitimacy (and Voter Engagement and Inclusiveness are certainly negatively impacted by unfairness as well). Full proportionality is not required to solve this problem, it is not an end in itself, but a tool to improve fairness. I have seen no calls for a one-national-district list PR system, which maximizes proportionality. The most common proposals are for MMP, small-district PR, and to a lesser extent hybrid systems.<sup>1</sup>

Proportionality needs to be improved, but more and more proportional is not better and better. Other factors that need to be balanced against proportionality are maintaining the relationship between MPs and constituents, having a Prime Minister from a party with a strong plurality of support, stable governance, limiting undue proliferation and influence of fringe or one-issue parties, and perhaps above all, maintaining strong local representation.

### **Local Representation**

One defining characteristic of Canada is a population unevenly dispersed over a very large area. Our expansiveness, combined with a long legacy of FPTP, means localness is more important here than perhaps anywhere in the world. Alienation is an easy problem to have in Canada and local representation – as local as possible – is key for voters to feel they can continue to be connected to government, both during elections and between them.

Even expanding ridings by 50%, as MMP might, hurts local representation in many parts of Canada. Many Canadians in small towns or even small cities and especially those in rural and remote areas will feel a great loss to be subsumed into larger ridings. This

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the proposals include a hybrid element for northern Canada if not more broadly.

could hurt voter engagement of marginal groups, and is detrimental to the inclusion of Aboriginal groups, farmers, and other interests that struggle to be heard in a riding of 100 000 or more, and could be lost in a larger riding.

This may not be nearly as true in urban areas, which also often have less distinct riding boundaries – an average urban street can separate ridings. PR proposals that call for multi-member ridings of 3-7 seats would likely be embraced in many parts of Canada, such as in larger cities, that would likely accept a riding of 400 000 to 1 million. So multi-member PR ridings may be a benefit in some parts of Canada and to some voters, but are a serious detriment to other parts of Canada and other groups of voters.

The solution to this geographically different valuation is to have a hybrid system: a mix of single seat ridings and multi-seat ridings. This addresses the heart of the tension between proportional and majoritarian systems – it doesn't enlarge and therefore weaken ridings in areas where that is important, such as where ridings are already geographically large or contain distinct demographics that don't want their voices lost in larger ridings. Other areas that are less sensitive to riding expansion can have larger multi-member ridings and much improved proportionality.

An alternative, MMP, while not terrible, is a blunt compromise and will feel like it. MMP aims to keep ridings as small as it can (though still likely about 50% bigger than now) while adding proportionality by having a second type of MP. Its ridings are bigger where we want to keep them small, while creating two tiers of MPs and a more complicated double voting system for voters, even in areas where a multi-member riding is acceptable. MMP also requires measures to prevent 'gaming' the system by political parties. Why impose a compromise system on the whole country when we can have location-specific solutions?

**Recommendation #2: Propose to voters in a referendum a hybrid electoral system, with some single-member ridings where riding size matters, and multi-member districts where riding size is not an issue.**

### **Riding's Choice**

There is reason to consider more carefully what ridings should remain single seat ridings and which should be merged. I don't think it is as simple as looking at physical size. There may be some urban ridings of a distinct nature that want to maintain their distinctiveness. There may be some rural or remote ridings that value the ability to elect multiple members over maintaining the most local riding they can.

The old-fashioned way of sorting this out is with extensive consultations by an Electoral Boundaries Commission every 10-20 years. That continues to be an option. This is slow-moving and expensive, and is more process than is needed for determining what is essentially a joining together of existing ridings, rather than a re-drawing of riding boundaries. We have modern tools for empowered, effective, and cost-efficient decision making by citizens. Therefore I propose that the decision to be a single riding or part of a

multi-member riding be made by voters in each riding – initially and on an on-going basis.

What's at stake when deciding between a single-member riding and a larger multi-member riding are two important decisions. The trade-off between localness and proportionality has been discussed above. Secondly, and much less discussed but important in practice, is how constituents are represented. There is no way to give constituents competition and choice amongst multiple MPs, as in multi-member ridings, while also keeping the strength of representation in small single member ridings with an MP with a duty to serve all constituents. Larger ridings can only weaken MPs' feel for their riding and make it harder for constituents to identify with their MP.

These are very important factors that affect people's connection to their democracy. Let voters balance their desire for small ridings and for proportionality (it will be as proportional as the electorate wants, and as local as the electorate wants), and their desire for one MP to represent everyone, or the choice of one of a team of competing MPs who may be more focused on certain voters. The outcome at the national level will be increased proportionality but with overall stability supported by single ridings and very small multi-member districts.

**Recommendation #3: The constituents of a riding should vote to choose to be a single-seat riding or part of a multi-seat riding.**

#### **Riding's Choice Hybrid System – Benefits**

There are many benefits to this system beyond balancing localness and proportionality and letting constituents determine which form of relationship with their MP works for them, including:

- It lets ridings choose their riding size in the most democratic way – voters decide.
- It is one of very few proposals that can possibly be initiated for the next election, since there are no changes to electoral boundaries.<sup>2</sup>
- It may moderate proportionality enough to maintain stability, perhaps generating near majorities.
- While it has a unique procedural element to it, the Riding's Choice Hybrid System involves tried and true political systems in the actual election itself. Federal elections are not the place for experimenting with brand-new election systems.

There is one more massive benefit to this system that no other system can claim with confidence: this system can win a referendum. Change must be incremental for the electorate to support the change initiative. The best proposal in the world accomplishes nothing if it's voted down. This referendum would simply be a vote to be able to merge ridings in the future, if voters want. It is a small change that empowers voters to make bigger changes later. That is by far the most likely system to win public support.

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<sup>2</sup> I want to see momentum maintained and fear that after an election electoral reform could be taken off the table, but I don't want to see the process rushed and then fail as a consequence – that would be the worst possible outcome.

Instead of having the electoral reform process picking winners and losers between localness and proportionality, between different riding sizes, between single MP focus or a slate of MPs, this system will let the public continue to own these decisions, for their sake and to allow electoral reform some chance of succeeding. There are those that oppose change and those that favour it, but even amongst those that favour it there are competing camps, and they could vote down change if it isn't the change they want. I believe all these camps are more likely to rally to a Riding's Choice Hybrid System than to any other option under consideration.

### **Riding's Choice – In Practice**

Initially all ridings would undertake a process to consider what merger option is most popular. I suggest this process be a petition process coordinated through some national body – most likely Elections Canada, but it could be some sort of Electoral Boundaries Commission. At the first election there would be a vote to keep their single-seat riding or merge into the multi-seat riding option generated by the petition process. The results would take effect for the following election. In the future the riding will have the option to revert to a single-set riding, or perhaps change to a different merger option. There will likely be a period of several elections where the public sees the results of mergers, and the results at the national level, and adjusts their riding mergers to get the result they want. Then, there will likely be relatively few ridings changing at each election.

The petition process would largely be an online process (with mail-in options and perhaps assistance with the online system at Service Canada offices and constituency offices). The stakes are much lower in the petition process than in an actual election, and I think most Canadians would be comfortable with online voting being used for these petitions. This also allows the piloting of online voting so it can be assessed both technically and for public trust and support.

In most cases, at least initially, the merger options should be somewhat generic and simple to understand, such as “joining a downtown Toronto district”, or “joining a district for southern Vancouver Island”. That allows flexibility for what ridings successfully petition to join, and which of those successfully vote to join (there may be some strange shapes and patterns to multi-member ridings initially, which won't be a problem, and will likely smooth out over time anyway). In other cases, especially over time, options could be more specific, such as “forming a two-member district between Trois Rivières and Saint Maurice – Champlain” (with a simple geographic description to clarify where that is).

Voters will not be forced to participate in the petition process. When they enter the voting booth they will have a ballot with a single type of voting, just like now, and they will sometimes have a yes-no question about riding mergers. It is simpler than MMP, which has two types of voting. Voter engagement will increase between elections as the petition process gives the voter the opportunity to be involved more continually, and

engagement will increase during elections as every vote will count more fully and more meaningfully.<sup>3</sup>

### **Conclusion**

A 'riding's-choice' hybrid system is moderate, easy to sell to the electorate, balances localness and proportionality, balances stability and proportionality, is strong on effectiveness, legitimacy, and voter engagement, and above all, excels at being democratic and can actually succeed at electoral reform.

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<sup>3</sup> I propose that all ballots be preferential, allowing deeper engagement of the electorate, but still allowing the minimally engaged voter to mark an X like before – it maximizes engagement without substantial voter complication. This and other details go beyond the constraints of this brief.