

**A Threat to Pluralism**

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Electoral Reform may have an unintended but potentially significantly negative effect on pluralism in Canada.

While we support electoral reform to end the first-past-the-post system, we are concerned that a proportional system could lead to intolerant parties getting a foothold in Parliament. Once such parties become legitimized by being admitted into Parliament, they often later become part of governing coalitions or at the very least succeed in having their anti-immigrant and anti-equity policies being adopted by governing coalitions in exchange for support for other legislation. This has happened across Europe (but only to a limited extent in the U.K.) likely in large part because of the existence of proportional systems in all of Europe except the U.K.

In 2015 in the U.K., the openly anti-immigrant United Kingdom Independence Party (the “UKIP”) captured a significant 12.7% of the vote, the third largest share of the popular vote of any party, (more than the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish Nationalists, and the Greens).<sup>i</sup>

Under proportional representation, the UKIP would have won 82 seats (instead of the one seat it did win), and more importantly would have held the balance in power as the two largest parties were relatively close in their popular support. (The Conservative Party received 36.9% and the Labour Party received 30.4% of the popular vote, respectively).<sup>ii</sup>

Non-proportional electoral systems in fact often act as a block on extreme views becoming legitimized in political and public discourse through the status and platform gained by such advocates being admitted into the legislature.

Anti-immigrant parties seem to generally continue to increase their share of the vote once admitted into the legislature. Even in Sweden, the Sweden Democrats Party, an anti-immigrant party, won representation in the Swedish *Riksdag* for the first time in 2010 with 5.7% of the vote and 20 MPs. In the 2014 election, it received 12.9% of the votes, doubling its support and becoming the third-largest party. Since 2015 and continuing into 2016, the Sweden Democrats have lead the polls with over 22% of the popular vote.<sup>iii</sup>

Similarly, in the Netherlands, the Party for Freedom, an anti-immigrant and in particular anti-Muslim party, led by Geert Wilders, won nine seats in 2006 making it the fifth-largest party in parliament. In 2010, it won 24 seats and 15.9% of the popular vote, making it the third-largest party and resulting in its admission into the governing coalition. Although losing some support in 2012, it still maintained its status as the third-largest party in parliament.<sup>iv</sup>

Polls in Canada have indicated that we cannot assume that an anti-immigrant or anti-multicultural party could not win a significant number of seats in Parliament.

For example, a Forum Research poll for the *Toronto Star* in September 2016 indicated that 67% of Canadian respondents favoured the idea that immigrants should be screened for anti-Canadian values.<sup>v</sup>

A CBC/Angus Reid institute poll also in September 2016 found that 68% of Canadian respondents said minorities should be doing more to fit in with mainstream society.<sup>vi</sup>

An Angus Reid poll in September 2013 found that 68% of Quebecers and 46% of other Canadians held an unfavourable view of Islam in 2009. In 2013, that figure had risen sharply to 54% in the rest of Canada and to 69% in Quebec.<sup>vii</sup>

It is not unreasonable then to assume then that if only 8% of Canadians (much less than the 20% popular vote already obtained in some European states) voted for an anti-immigrant party, under a proportional system such a party would win nearly 30 seats in Parliament. This would be a significant bloc of seats in any minority Parliament.<sup>viii</sup>

Even if a traditional centre or centre-right governing coalition would not openly admit an anti-immigrant party into the government, a virtually irresistible temptation would exist for such a governing coalition to make at least some concessions to an anti-immigrant party in order to pass its other legislation or to maintain power if such a party held the balance of power in Parliament.

A proportional electoral system could thus be a significant danger to the future of Canada and its vulnerable communities. We cannot take for granted the pluralistic nature of Canada. Preserving Canada's pluralism must perhaps be the most important factor in choosing a new electoral system. A new electoral system must reward parties that move toward the centre politically and above all must prevent an anti-immigrant and anti-equity party from gaining a foothold in Parliament.

A preferential ballot system would likely be the most effective new system in reducing such a threat in our current Canadian context. A preferential ballot system would also reduce distortions as compared to our current first-past-the-post system while still preserving the accountability, integrity, and relative independence of local representation. Above all, a preferential ballot system can increase voter engagement and legitimacy of overall election outcomes without the unintended though serious risk that a proportional system can have on Canada's world-leading pluralism by the legitimization and expansion of extreme and destructive views through their admission into Parliament.<sup>ix</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_Kingdom\\_general\\_election,\\_2015](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Kingdom_general_election,_2015)

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/mps/current-state-of-the-parties/>

<sup>iii</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sweden\\_Democrats](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sweden_Democrats); <http://www.breitbart.com/london/2016/06/30/swedens-counter-mass-migration-movement-will-largest-party-election/>

<sup>iv</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Party\\_for\\_Freedom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Party_for_Freedom)[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dutch\\_general\\_election,\\_2012](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dutch_general_election,_2012)

<sup>v</sup> <http://poll.forumresearch.com/post/2587/voters-agree-with-screening-for-anti-canadian-values/>

<sup>vi</sup> <http://angusreid.org/canada-values/>

<sup>vii</sup> <http://www.macleans.ca/politics/land-of-intolerance/>

<sup>viii</sup> Minority Parliaments would most likely become the norm in a proportional system as Canada has had only three popular vote majorities since 1940. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landslide\\_victory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landslide_victory); [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian\\_federal\\_election,\\_1940](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian_federal_election,_1940); [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian\\_federal\\_election,\\_1958](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian_federal_election,_1958); [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian\\_federal\\_election,\\_1984](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian_federal_election,_1984)

<sup>ix</sup> **This brief has been submitted by the Downtown Muslim Professional Network, a network of over 2000 Canadian Muslim professionals in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton area.**