

## **Alternative Approaches to Electoral Reform in Canada**

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Does Canada need electoral reform? Is there a set of reforms that can be recommended as best? Will this set of reforms be supported by a consensus of Canadians? How can the consensus be reflected in legislation?

This paper will deal with only the second of these questions. It will do so by:

- Outlining five options for reform;
- Setting out 12 criteria to be used in evaluation;
- Performing the evaluation on the five approaches; and
- Drawing the conclusions based on the analysis.

### **Options**

Here are the five options to be considered.

**First Past the Post:** The person getting the most votes is elected. Note that 'most' refers to a plurality, not necessarily a majority. This system is currently used in Canada, the United States of America, the United Kingdom and many former English colonies.

**Alternative Vote:** The voter ranks all the candidates in order of preference. If one candidate wins a majority, that person is elected. If there is no outright majority, the person with the lowest number of votes is dropped and their votes are redistributed to those candidates who were the second preference of the voters whose candidate is being dropped. If a majority is created, the candidate with the majority is elected. If there is still no majority, the candidate with the next lowest vote is dropped and their vote redistributed. This process repeats until a majority results. This approach is used in Australia.

**Two Rounds:** Here there are two rounds of voting. If in the first round someone gets a majority, that person is elected. If there is no majority from the first round, the two top candidates compete in the second round – with the winner being elected. A variant of this approach is used in France.

Proportional Representation: The number of seats awarded to a party is in proportion to the number of votes received by that party. The selection of the members of the legislature is most commonly done from the party lists put together by the leaders of the political party. Proportional representation is the most wide spread of electoral systems in terms of the number of nations using it.

Mixed System: The legislature is chosen by a combination of First Past the Post and Proportional Representation. Germany does this.

### **Criteria**

My criteria will be set out in three categories: Democratic, Operational, and Government Performance. Please feel free to add your own criteria.

#### **Democratic**

Purpose: What is the point of having a democracy? The purpose is so that the government reflects the will of the people.

Proportion: Does the composition of the legislature adequately reflect the distribution of votes in the election?

Selection: Are members selected by vote of the people or determined by the party leadership?

Support: Do individual members have support from a majority of their electors?

Dynamic: Does the system open the process to new parties with new ideas so that the range of voter choice is expanded?

#### **Operational**

Simplicity: Is the system easy to understand, operate and participate in?

Cost: Is the system expensive to run?

Participation: Are people motivated to participate in the process?

## **Government Performance**

**Stability:** Does the system tend to produce adequately stable government?

**Agenda:** Will the government structure give the government enough power to deliver on its agenda and deal with emergencies?

**Attention span:** Will the government be able to plan for the future or will their attention be focused on today or next week's vote in the legislature?

**Accountability:** Is there a strong accountability relationship between individual members of the legislature and their constituents?

## **Evaluation**

### **Purpose:**

Granted that a democracy should reflect the will of the people, there is a further question about how the will is defined. Do people want a legislature that is ideologically similar to the whole people? Or do they want to elect the person who is considered the best at representing their district? If the former, then Proportional Representation or possibly the Mixed System is best. But if the goal of the election is to choose the best person in each riding, then First Past the Post, Two Rounds or Alternative Vote will be favored. This is because the process in proportional approaches is on selecting from the party list while in non-proportional approaches, you vote for an individual member.

### **Proportion:**

The First Past the Post is notorious for producing anomalies in the distribution of seats. A party with a majority of votes overall the country can lose an election, And a party with significant support spread thinly over the country can wind up with very few seats. Two Rounds and Alternative Vote do not deal with this problem. Proportional Representation is aimed directly at this issue. And a Mixed System can also solve this in whole or in part.

### **Selection:**

First Past the Post, Alternative Vote and Two Rounds all have the voters choosing directly those who will sit in the legislature. Under Proportional Representation,

voters determine the total number of seats each party gets, but the selection of legislators is made in the rank order set out in party lists prepared by the party leaders. [ This can be modified if open lists are used.] Mixed Systems have a mix of legislators chosen by the voters and by party lists.

### **Support:**

Candidates under the First Past the Post system need only a plurality of votes, not a majority. Two Rounds and Alternative Vote require a majority support for all members. Under these approaches, it is not enough to have a core support of 40% of voters. One must be able to broaden support to appeal to more than half of all voters. Proportional Representation and Mixed Systems do not address this support issue. [Note the question of majority support in the legislature will be addressed below under Governance.]

### **Dynamics:**

Proportional Representation and the Mixed System can promote the formation of new parties with the number increasing over time. This result can be limited by having a minimum percentage threshold in terms of the national vote required to obtain any seats in the legislature. Over time one may expect some of the following: a stronger contingent of Greens, libertarians, right wing nationalists, the radical left, internet privacy advocates, farmers, religious groups and regional interests may compete under the new set of rules. In addition to an attraction to the legislature, they may also be attracted by the possibility of being part of a coalition government with representation in cabinet.

### **Simplicity:**

The Alternative Vote system is the most complex for voters to use. If there are 8 candidates in a riding, the voter must rank all 8 in order of preference. While parties suggest an order ranking, this seems to defeat the purpose of full and true expression of voter choice. Proportional Representation can be simple for the voter but presents new challenges for design. These include the design of multi-member districts; the allocation of seats given fractional shares; second-tier seats to help reflect more closely the proportional allocation; minimum thresholds share in the national vote required to limit access to the legislature for parties with marginal support; and the decision between open or closed party lists. The

Mixed System shares some of these design requirements plus those related to having two classes of members – directly elected and party list. Two Rounds does require a second vote but the process is not complex from a design or voter perspective.

**Cost:**

While costs will vary somewhat between approaches, this should not be a deciding factor. The cost of an election is about 1/10 of 1% of the federal budget. Any significant improvement in our system of choosing a Government would be well worth the cost.

**Participation:**

In Second Round, one would expect a fall off in the second round among voters whose first choice has been eliminated or in ridings where one of the two remaining candidates has a substantial lead or where voters suffer from voting fatigue. One might think that the complexity of Alternative Vote would lower participation; but any such effect is more than off set in Australia by a compulsory voting requirement. Proportional Representation and the Mixed System will increase voting among those who live in ridings where their favorites would never win under First Past the Post. The votes of people in these districts would still count in determining proportional shares.

**Governance:**

The Proportional and Mixed Systems have a strong tendency to produce minority or coalition governments because it is difficult to get 50% or more support in a single round of balloting. First Past the Post, Second Round and Alternative Vote are more likely to produce a majority government, although this result is far from certain.

There are three concerns with minority government that need to be explored. First, minority governments tend to be less stable than majority government. Extreme instability can destroy the effectiveness of government and create a vacuum into which others may step. A lesser degree of instability can also disrupt the ongoing operation of government, A firm and secure coalition agreement is a necessary requirement for a stable minority democracy.

Second, a minority government may make it impossible for a government to deliver on its agenda. At the least, it opens its agenda to renegotiation with some of the other parties. An agreement may strengthen support for an amended agenda Or negotiations could result in gridlock Or something in between.

Third, the attention span of governments in a minority situation tends to be significantly shorter. The focus is often on short-term survival and not on longer term planning.

A fourth consideration, that may somewhat offset the other concerns, is that minority government may be more sensitive to shifts in the perceived public will.

### **Accountability:**

One of the advantages of those approaches which elect members directly is that there is a stronger accountability relationship between the member and the voters who elect, and potentially re-elect the member. It is clear that you can bring problems to your local member and you hold him or her responsible at election time for his or her service. Where members are selected in multi-person districts from party lists, it is not as clear which person has the lead in serving the district. This problem is an important reason for using the Mixed System, which has local representation, rather than pure Proportional Representation, which does not.

### **Conclusions**

It should be clear that no one approach is superior on all criteria. So members must weigh these considerations in order to make their judgement.

It may be useful to simplify the decision process by focusing on a relatively small set of comparisons at a time:

- First Past the Post vs. Proportional Representation
- First Past the Post vs. Second Round vs Alternative Vote
- Proportional Representation vs. Mixed System.

First Past the Post vs Proportional Representation

People will tend to favor First Past the Post if

- They believe the most important purpose of elections is to choose the best people to represent the district and to have the primary accountability for that member to local voters – focus on members of the legislature and not on the party;
- They believe that majority government is desirable because it is stable, allows sound planning for the future and allows the Government an opportunity to deliver on their agenda.
- They want an approach that is simple and inexpensive.

People will tend to favor Proportional Representation if:

- It is important to have the ideological and policy positions in the legislature reflect distribution of the ideological preferences of all voters;
- It is desirable that party leadership play a strong role in selecting the party list that establishes the likelihood of a candidate being elected; and also play a dominant role in negotiation of the composition of the coalition government – focus is on party, not legislative members;
- They believe stable medium-term coalitions will be negotiated and that strong agreement can be reached on the coalition agenda.
- The entry of new parties is desirable;
- Party lists will be used to increase the selection to the legislature of otherwise under-represented groups.

First Past the Post vs. Second Round vs. Alternative Vote

Major considerations:

- The Alternative Vote is much more complex than other systems. It requires a full preference ordering of all candidates selected by voters.
- Australia combines Alternative Vote with compulsory voting, but compulsory voting could be used with other systems as well;
- Both Alternative Voting and Second Round produce an ultimate majority support for the winning candidates. This contrasts to the mere plurality under First Past the Post;

On balance, I would recommend Second Round system over the current system as it produces a form of majority support from voters for their local member; and I recommend Second Round over Alternative Vote because of the complexity of the Alternative Vote system.

### Proportional Representation vs Mixed System

#### Major considerations

- The Mixed System combines the constituency function of First Past the Post with seats awarded on proportionality that can partially or fully correct for disproportionality of the First Past the Pole results.
- Election of proportional seats can be done at the same time as the constituency seats – so little administrative burden is created.
- The Mixed System requires some sorting out of roles between members selected by the different methods.

On balance, the retention of the voter-member relationship recommends the Mixed System over pure Proportional Representation.

And finally, I would recommend Second Round over Mixed System because of the problems associated with minority government.

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