

Brief by Eric Wirsching

Recommendation:

Choose an electoral system whereby the members of Parliament who are Elected to the House of Commons will Proportionally Represent the total number of votes cast by the Canadian population. Choose a method of Proportional Representation.

Scope:

This brief discusses how systems of Proportional Representation (PR), regardless of specific structure, positively affect the 'voting environment' that voters find themselves in when deciding how to cast their vote. This brief **will not** attempt to persuade as to which system of PR best suits Canadians.

Rationale:

There are many reasons why it is important we choose a method of Proportional Representation (PR). I believe the 'voting environment' created by PR alone (when compared to the 'voting environment' created by other systems) is enough of a reason to commit to it in principle, and search for a method of PR that is right for Canadians. Other electoral systems fail to foster a positive 'voting environment'; ***one where citizens feel they can vote for the party or candidate that most aligns with their values BECASUE all votes will contribute equally to shaping the composition of the House of Commons.*** I believe our current First Past the Post (FPTP) system as well as other systems (such as the Ranked Ballot or Alternative Vote system) contribute negatively to the overall 'voting environment' by limiting Canadians from participating as they would most like to.

I think the potential of PR to fully meet the 5 electoral reform principles outlined in the motion passed by the House of Commons on June 7, 2016 is greater than any other 'family' of electoral systems. However, attempting to maximize the achievement of all of these 5 principles will require debate to the specific method of PR, which is beyond the scope of this brief. I expect the reader is aware of the 5 electoral reform principles outlined in the motion passed by the House of Commons on June 7, 2016. They are quoted in condensed form below in bold and can be found in full at the link provided:

- 1) **Effectiveness and legitimacy**
- 2) **Engagement**
- 3) **Accessibility and inclusiveness**
- 4) **Integrity**
- 5) **Local representation**

Source: <http://www.parl.gc.ca/Committees/en/ERRE/About>

These 5 principles, as outlined in the House of Commons motion, and the degree to which they are upheld, will shape the 'voting environment' that Canadians experience when they start thinking about how they will cast their vote in a new electoral system. People will ask themselves questions such as: "Will my vote count?"; "Can I vote for the party or candidate that most aligns with my values?"; "Will I be given reason to doubt the effectiveness of my vote to shape the outcome of the election?". One of the more troubling questions I have heard people ask themselves is: "**Should I consider abandoning my values and vote for the candidate that is most likely to beat the candidate I DON'T want to have influence over national policies?**" In my view this question strikes at the core of what a truly democratic

electoral system must provide to its citizens: it must provide truly free choice and equal influence over the composition of the House of Commons. The bolded question above is a question I believe no citizen should ever be given reason to ask themselves. The only system of voting I am aware of that eliminates the legitimacy of this question is a PR system.

Below I outline some examples that I believe are indicative of an unhealthy and ultimately undemocratic or pseudo-democratic voting environment. These examples signify elements of the voting environment being fostered by the current Canadian FPTP electoral system. Our new electoral system should not allow for these examples to continue to be possible. Instead we should foster truly free choice and equal influence over the composition of the House of Commons through PR. The very possibility of the occurrence of these situations should be structurally excluded from our new electoral system:

1. A citizen supports political party or candidate X, but has valid reason to believe that a vote for that party or candidate will not contribute meaningfully to affecting the composition of the House of Commons, so instead they vote for a political party that doesn't align as well with their values OR they vote for the party or candidate they think has the best chance of beating the party or candidate they least like, OR they spoil their ballot in protest OR WORST OF ALL, they become disillusioned and do not vote at all; they give up hope that their voice will be heard and are unwilling to compromise their values in order to be heard. They complain to their friends, families and colleagues that they cannot be adequately represented by the electoral system, which breeds a culture of cynicism towards the Canadian government, its officials, its programs, its staff and public servants generally. This is an extreme example, but I know through experience these attitudes exist, and having an electoral system that perpetuates such attitudes is destructive to the democratic process because at the very least it makes people feel excluded from it because it limits their participation.

In my view, the widespread 'strategic voting' campaigns that took place in 2015 Canadian Federal Election was a perfect example of why anything other than a proportionately representative electoral system should not be considered. In a voting environment where each vote is counted equally towards affecting the composition of the House of Commons it will be (at the very least) extremely difficult to convince individuals their vote will not contribute meaningfully to affecting the composition of the House of Commons. Systems other than PR will not produce outcomes that truly reflect the Canadian public because the voting environment itself (which is create by the electoral system) affects how people are choosing to vote. While individuals may always have the freedom to mark which ever box they choose on a ballot, regardless of which type of electoral system we have, only in a PR system will each individual have the same level of influence over the composition of the House of Commons as every other individual. Knowing this when entering the balloting booth provides a level of *assurance* that is unparalleled in any other electoral system I am aware of. As a voter I want to be granted this assurance; that my vote will equally contribute to creating the composition of the House of Commons.

2. Political parties with distinct policy platforms have significant support from voting Canadians, and simultaneously achieve insignificant representation in the House of Commons.

When an electoral system allows for the possibility of this outcome it seems to violate democratic principles. It disengages voters who are not willing to compromise their values, and further encourages campaigns such as the 'strategic vote' campaign of the 2015 Federal Election. In such voting environments it is easy to give voters reason to vote for a party where their vote is 'more likely to count'

or to 'vote strategically' to usurp one particular party of influence instead of granting influence to the party that most aligns with their values. Again, Canadians are not granted assurance their vote will make a meaningful difference, so they resort to other options, including disengagement.

3. It is possible for a political party to win more than 50% of the seats in the House of Commons without gaining the support of 50% of the voting public. It is possible for so-called 'false majority' governments to form.

When an electoral system allows the possibility of this outcome it inherently maintains an element that is contrary to common sense. Is it *fair* that one political party can have a majority of the seats in the House without a majority of the voting public's approval? If we endorsed our current FPTP system we might try to rationalize this outcome or somehow respond yes to this question, which would be unintuitive. I think it requires a great stretch of the imagination to say that this is truly a democratic outcome. This outcome does not help to create an electoral system that effectively or fairly represents Canadians. This outcome disengages voters, decreases the perceived legitimacy of the government that forms and negatively effects the long term integrity and trust of the electoral process.

What kind of electoral system do we have if, come election time, and for decades on end, citizens of Canada are given reason to *even consider* the following question: **"Should I consider abandoning my values and vote for the party that is most likely to beat the party I DON'T want to have influence over national policies?"**... or another question which is arguably worse, and often accompanies the first question when a person finds themselves in this dilemma; **"I have reason to believe my vote is NOT going to meaningfully affect the outcome of the election, so should I just stay at home and disengage from the democratic process?"**. What kind of country are we creating together if these are the types of questions voters are given reason to ask themselves time and time again? I am not aware of any other electoral systems, other than a PR system, that will create a voting environment where every voter is assured that their vote will have the same affect on the composition of the House of Commons as every other vote that is cast.

In this brief I have taken a very voter centric approach, but the voting environment created by the electoral system has implications far beyond individual voters. I don't wish to dwell on points that reach beyond individual voters because I believe the electoral system should be built for individual Canadians. It should be built to suit their needs, to engage them, to incentivise their participation, to have their voice heard and ultimately represented fairly in Parliament. Individual voters have to be given true reason to believe in the process of election, in the outcomes of the election and ultimately in the authority of the House of Commons. If it so happens that we do want to think beyond the individual voter we can also ask ourselves, what kind of behaviour will we be incentivising from our individual Parliamentarians? What kind of strategies will political parties be engaging in if we have a PR electoral system? How will the House of Commons function if majority governments are much less likely to occur? How will that fact affect election rhetoric? I will briefly address these questions by stating that I think it will foster more cooperation amongst political parties and elevate the rhetoric. Working together will be a part of the day to day political process in this country, instead of the divisiveness there is now commonplace and even expected in some instances. A culture of working together, if emulated by elected officials, has the potential to spread into the wider society and set a positive example for everyone to follow.

Summary

The main premises presented in this brief (with the exception of the 5 electoral reform principles outlined in the motion passed by the House of Commons on June 7, 2016) are as follows:

1. We must take a voter centric approach to electoral reform by considering first and foremost the type of 'voting environment' the new electoral system creates for voters.
2. Proportional Representation is the only family of voting systems that provides a voting environment of *assurance*; where voters can be assured beyond any reasonable doubt that every vote cast will have an equal effect over the composition of the House of Commons.
3. When voters know that every vote cast will have an equal effect over the composition of the House of Commons they will feel confident voting for the political party or individual candidate that most aligns with their values and will be less easily persuaded to act otherwise. This is a core principle that is highly valued.
4. The voting environment of assurance seems to satisfy outright the first and second electoral reform principles as outlined in the motion passed by the House of Commons on June 7, 2016. They are bolded and listed below in full:

1) Effectiveness and legitimacy: that the proposed measure would increase public confidence among Canadians that their democratic will, as expressed by their votes, will be fairly translated and that the proposed measure reduces distortion and strengthens the link between voter intention and the election of representatives;

2) Engagement: that the proposed measure would encourage voting and participation in the democratic process, foster greater civility and collaboration in politics, enhance social cohesion and offer opportunities for inclusion of underrepresented groups in the political process;

Source: <http://www.parl.gc.ca/Committees/en/ERRE/About>

5. The PR family of voting systems have the potential to satisfy all 5 electoral reform principles as outlined in the motion passed by the House of Commons on June 7, 2016 better than any other family of voting systems.
6. The assurance provided by PR voting environments will eliminate, if not seriously mitigate issues of 'strategic voting' or voters voting other than for parties/candidates that truly reflect their values.
7. The lack of assurance currently experienced in the Canadian voting environment causes many voters to vote in ways that do not reflect their true values, therefore the composition of the House of Commons is skewed and does not reflect the will of Canadians. Systems other than PR will emulate this environment to some extent, which is not acceptable.