

# Electoral Reform: A Canadian Solution

## The Problems with the Current System

Canada's current electoral system produces several democratic deficits:

1. The make-up of Parliament doesn't represent the will of the people
  - a. Governments often have full power with less than the support of 40% of voters
  - b. There have been several cases in Canada where the second place party, in terms of the number of votes, gained power, sometimes with a majority, and thus 100% of the power
2. The vote of a person who votes for one party has a different value in terms of representation to one who votes for another party
  - a. The votes of those who vote for the party who comes in third are usually worth half as much as those who vote for the winning party
  - b. This means all people are not treated equally under the law, and the system is actually unconstitutional
3. The system causes apathy in people who do not support the politics of the two dominant parties from voting or participating
  - a. Why vote or campaign in a safe riding of a main party?
  - b. Why vote or campaign if you know the chances of winning and your views being represented are next to zero?
  - c. Why encourage others to support your views
  - d. This is especially true of young people even if they are politically aware (it was true for me)
4. The system encourages people to vote strategically, that is, to not vote for what they want, but what they do not want.
  - a. The make-up of parliament is thus further unrepresentative of the will of the people
5. The system encourages confrontation, personal attacks, and half-truths rather than cooperation and honest debate of the issues

The above problems are clearly demonstrated by the last couple of elections. The Harper government came to power with 40% of the vote. Because they had 100% control of government they were able to implement many policies that most Canadians were thoroughly opposed to. The main issue in the ensuing election became "Stop Harper". Many voters rightly thought that to do this they only had a choice of voting for either the Liberals or the NDP in order to prevent Harper from regaining power. Thus, many voters had their eyes on the polls, and after weeks of deadlock, the NDP lost support in one region, and voters correctly saw that the Liberals had the best chances of defeating Harper. Liberals thus won a majority with 40% of the vote, because many voters voted Liberal even though they thought the NDP or the Green Party best represented their views. The actual support for the Liberals was likely closer to 30%, and yet, they gained 100% control of the government.

# The Different Systems of Voting

There are two main types of voting systems: majoritarian and proportional.

## Majoritarian Systems

In majoritarian systems, like our system, the candidate with the most number of votes wins. They simply need to have one more vote than their opponent; they don't need a majority of the votes, just more than the others. If there are 3 or 4 close candidates, they can win with a third or a fourth of the votes. In this system the winner takes all, the votes of all the other voters are disregarded. Their views are simply not represented, only the views of those who support the winner will be represented. The winner will govern according to her/his views, and that of the party s/he represents. Majority governments are not infrequently elected with just over third of the support, and thus gain 100% of the power. It is for this reason that governments in this system frequently pass legislation that the majority of the population opposes.

Despite this, many who vote under this system like it, because it favours majority governments, which are viewed as producing more stable and longer governments. However, the actual facts and statistics do not support this: governments under proportional systems are actually more stable and longer.

Many also like the system, because it shuts out what they perceive as "extremist" views. Most voters are by definition centrist (the majority determines where the centre is), and thus do not care for the outlying and what they see as extreme views. However, this simply means that these voices are silenced by the majority. If one believes all should have a voice at the table, then this thinking is especially deplorable, because there is no danger of "extreme" views gaining power: by definition, only a tiny fraction of the population supports such views. All electoral systems support the centre, because the majority defines where the centre is.

There are variations of the majoritarian type of voting systems to make them seemingly more representative. One can have second or third votes, where the candidates with the least number of votes have been dropped off the ballot. Voting continues until a candidate has more than 50% of the vote. This voting system forces voters to vote strategically: they vote for their second or third choice. This result can also be accomplished by having voters rank the candidates according to whom they prefer on one ballot. The ballots are then counted repeatedly. In the first count the candidate with the least number of votes is dropped off, and the second choice of the people whom had the dropped candidate as their first choice is then used in the second count.

These systems allow for voters whose first or second (etc.) candidate did not win to be represented by the person whose opinions they dislike the least. Thus, in the end the result is slightly more representative. However, the result is still the same. The winning candidate will govern according to her/his political views, that is, those of the party s/he represents. It also does not remove the problem of people voting strategically, but forces them to do it.

Another problem, is that it favours the most centrist party. Thus, if there were, as there is in Canada, three main parties the NDP left of centre, the Liberals in the centre, and the Conservatives to the right of centre, the Liberals would gain in their number of votes. This is

because voters who have positions on the left, prefer positions closer to them, that is centrist positions rather than right wing positions; the same goes for voters on the right in regards to left-wing positions. Thus, the second choice for NDP voters is more likely to be Liberal than Conservative, the second choice for Conservative is also Liberal rather than NDP.

A study done of voters in the last election confirmed this scenario, and it was estimated that the Liberals with their 40% of the vote would have actually have gained an even larger majority. True, there are no large scale studies that prove this, and this study is to a degree hypothetical, because in a different system the parties would use different strategies. However, this is hiding behind a veil of obscurity: the fact is people to the left of the Liberals prefer them to the Conservatives, and people to the right of the Liberals prefer them over the NDP.

Thus, repeated voting or ranked ballots to obtain a “true” majority do not solve the major problems of our current system, but would likely make them worse. It could also lead to an endless rule by the Liberal Party. The governing Liberal Party, if it were to propose such a system would receive widespread opposition from both the right and the left, so much so, that it would put a halt to electoral reform. Enacting such an electoral model would lead many to conclude the Liberals were not sincere about electoral change. It would also be seen as being highly duplicitous, especially since the Liberals campaigned on Fair Vote Canada’s slogan of “Let every vote count”, which is their slogan for a proportional system.

Another perceived advantage of the current system, and one that many people seem to like, is that the winning candidate is a local candidate, and voters get to vote for an actual person they know on some level, as opposed to a party, and some unknown person representing them. Many seem to like this perceived personal connection to their member of parliament.

However, in reality most people do not base their vote on the personality of the candidate, but the party of candidate, the policies it represents, and the personality of its leader. Furthermore, it is not clear that a majority of people would prefer to be represented by a local candidate whose policies they disagree with, rather than a non-local candidate whose policies they agree with. Also, the candidate who wins, though s/he is supposed to represent the whole of their riding, actually governs and argues only for their own viewpoint and that of the party they represent. Thus, there is often dissatisfaction by a majority of voters with the policies enacted by the governments elected under the current system. There is also a sense of hopelessness, that no real change is possible.

## **Proportional Systems**

In proportional systems, the number of seats a party receives is proportional to the number of votes they receive. These systems are thus the only system where every vote truly counts. People vote for a party, not a candidate. The potential candidates are chosen by the parties and presented as a list before the election. There are two types of lists: closed lists, where the party will choose which candidates from the list, and open lists where the population votes on the lists.

There are many different ways proportional systems can be put into practice. This is one of their advantages; for example, one can place requirements that the members from the lists

come from different regions, have gender parity, be age representative, and even ethnically representative. The possibilities are endless, and can be adapted to a country's peculiar circumstances; for example, Canada may consider reserving a number of seats for their First Nations. Consequently, proportional systems allow parliaments to be fully representative on several different levels.

Some proportional systems are less inclusive than others. Some set a minimum percentage a party must receive in order to receive seats in the parliament. This, will naturally exclude some voices. Some voices will have to be excluded: a parliament only has a certain number seats. The natural minimum of votes required is the total number of votes divided by the number of seats in parliament.

The reasons for setting a higher minimum is that some think that it is desirable to limit the representation of "extreme" voices. However, this is not really necessary, because by definition, such extreme voices are only supported by a few, and they will only have a miniscule number of seats. There is no real reason to silence such voices, especially if the desire is to be as representative as possible of the diversity of the population.

There are two main objections to proportional systems: they do not provide stable governments, and that they eliminate the perceived direct connection between the voter and their representative.

Opponents often point to Italy and Israel, who at times have produced a series of very short lived governments. Israel is also pointed to a system where very minority extremist parties force their views on the centrist governing parties. First, even Israel and Italy have on average had longer and less frequent governments than we have had in Canada. Considering the vast majority of governments around the world use a proportional system, pointing to one or two outliers can only be seen as deliberate obscuration. Second, Israel, is a very unique situation. The country has an extremely high number of people with what we would call extreme religious viewpoints. Currently they form a plurality of very small parties which the centrist parties have to accommodate in order to form power. However, in a system like ours, they would likely form a single party that would still probably gain enough votes to block centrist parties from gaining a majority. The situation would unlikely change that much due to religious tensions and the Palestinian conflict.

To truly judge how proportional systems work, one should instead look at the highly successful European countries, which have a similar economic and cultural situation to ours, such as Germany, Holland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, to name a few. The governments in these countries are often more stable and longer lasting than those in Canada, and this despite they are usually not majority governments, but coalition and minority governments. This last fact is why many assume proportional systems are less stable. They are not, because the force people to work together. There is often a less antagonistic atmosphere. Legislation is still passed, and it is rarely legislation that the majority doesn't desire, something that often happens under the current majoritarian system.

Many of the European countries mentioned above use a mixed proportional system. A certain number of votes, usually around 50% are cast according to a proportional system, and the rest according to a majoritarian system like ours. The votes for the proportional system are then used to balance out the votes cast under the majoritarian system to produce a proportional result. Thus if a party receives proportionally more seats from the majoritarian portion of the seats, they would receive less seats from the proportionally allotted seats. Also, smaller parties who perhaps did not receive any seats from the majoritarian portion, would receive seats.

Thus, if a party gets 30% of the vote and 25% of the seats according to the majoritarian voting, they would receive another 5% worth of seats. Also, if there were geographic and gender stipulations, then these could be used to limit what candidates the parties could appoint; for example, if one wished to achieve gender parity, and 3/5 of the 25% worth of the seats achieved in the above example were women, and 2/5 of the 25% were men, then all the extra 5% of seats to be appointed would all have to be men.

Since these systems allow for there to be a direct link with a local member of parliament, they allow for the best of both systems.

It is not surprising that in general, countries with proportional systems have higher voter turnout and participation. After all, if one knows one's vote will count, then one is more likely to go out and vote. It is simply human nature; people are less enthused about doing things when there is no benefit. This is especially shown in so-called safe ridings in our current system, that is, seats where a certain party is almost guaranteed to win: they have the lowest voter turnout.

## **A Mixed Proportional System for Canada**

Canada due to its size, history, and constitution presents challenges for any electoral system. There are problems of representation of the provinces and the diverse ethnic populations. Often certain regions can feel left out of government; for example, the Western provinces. Certain ethnic populations feel under represented; for example, first nations. Geography also makes representation difficult: there are huge northern areas with very few inhabitants, which means some ridings are a lot larger than many countries.

This last fact makes a straightforward mixed proportional system difficult to enact, that is, one keeps the same number of seats, and apportions half to a proportional system and half to the current system. It would make the ridings in the north even more unmanageable, because they would be twice the size. To make a proportional system it would probably be advisable to increase the number of seats in the parliament. The following suggestion is based on a house of 400 seats, but a lower number would also work.

It is proposed that the 100 hundred or so largest ridings remain the same size and be their members elected via the current system. The remaining 300 seats will be double up producing 150 double ridings with one member elected under the current system and the other appointed according to the proportional system. Every voter will vote for both a local candidate and a political party to determine the proportional allotment.

Thus 250 seats would be elected under the current system. Using the results of the last election as relative guide the result would be Liberals 136, Conservatives 72, NDP 33, BQ 8, and the Greens 1. With a 400 seat house, the proportionally the seats will need to end up being Liberals 159, Conservatives 129, NDP 79, BQ 19, and the Greens 14. This would mean that the 150 seats dedicated to be assigned proportionally would be assigned as follows: Liberals 23, Conservatives 57, NDP 46, BQ 11, and the Greens 13.

The above figures are just to give an example, the make-up under such a system in the last election would have been different. Not only would people not needed to have voted strategically, but some of the smaller parties would have reached the threshold for a seat (.25% with 400 seats). The Liberals would almost certainly have had less seats, and the NDP and Greens would have had more. The Conservatives would likely have the same number. The actual government would have to be formed through a coalition. The political parties would have to learn how to cooperate.

The proportional representatives will be appointed to the double ridings, and share the responsibilities for the riding. A shared office may be desirable for ombudsman/woman like duties of MPs.

I suggest having the limit for the seat be the minimum possible, so the full diversity of Canada be represented, enact compulsory voting, which means parties will need to address need the concerns of poorer people, who tend to vote less, reserving 5% of the seats for First Nations, lower the voting age to 16, and have laws requiring gender and age balance. Everything is possible, it is simply a matter of working out the details.

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