

A CASE for ELECTORAL REFORM

by Yelda Miedema

The Merriam-Webster defines Democracy as “a system of government in which everyone is treated equally and has equal rights,” The online Oxford Dictionary defines democracy as “a system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representative.”

If one accepts “equal representation” of the “whole population” as a fundamental principle of democracy then one must embrace “Proportional Representation” (PR) as the only truly democratic electoral system, given that both our current “first-past-the-post” (FPP) system and the proposed “Preferential Ballot” (PB) system disenfranchise the majority of Canadian voters.

In this brief I will endeavour to make that case that Canada’s current system of electoral politics is unfair and undemocratic insofar as, with rare exception, it suppresses, rather than represents, the will of the majority of Canadians who did not vote for the candidates of the party that ultimately forms the government. The last time the government actually represented the will of the majority was the PC government of 1984 which garnered $\frac{3}{4}$ of the seats in parliament on the strength of 50.03% of the popular vote.

Furthermore, I will endeavour to make that case that replacing our current First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) with a Preferential Ballot (PB) system of government is equally, if not more, undemocratic insofar as it effectively forces Canadians into the false dichotomy of making their second choice a candidate whose views may well oppose those of the voter, or it forces them to leave their second choice blank, in which case s/he has effectively reverted back to FPTP.

As a comparison of the October 19, 2015 election demonstrates, PB would actually have exacerbated the disenfranchisement of Canadian voters, effectively compounding the inequality of FPTP by disproportionately favouring the centrist party most likely to be the second choice of the greatest number of Canadians.

A Comparison of % popular vote vs #seats and %seats for FPTP, PR, and PB for the Oct 19, 2015 Federal Election Results

	%PV	FPTP #seats/%seats	PB #seats/%seats	PR #seats/%seats
Liberal	39.5	184/54.5	224/66.3	134/39.5
CPC	31.9	99/29.3	61/18.0	109/31.9
NDP	19.7	44/13.0	50/14.8	50/19.7
BQ	4.7	10/3.0	2/0.6	16/4.7
Green	3.4	1/0.3	1/0.3	12/3.4

As these statistics clearly demonstrate, the Liberal Party was the overwhelming beneficiary of the FPTP system at the expense of every other party. The result is that 39.5 % of Canadians who voted Liberal are now represented by 54.5% of parliamentarians in Ottawa, while the 60.5% of Canadian voters who voted for the other parties now have only 45.5% of the representation in parliament.

What makes this unequal representation even worse is that the constituents in those ridings in Canada now represented by opposition parties are effectively without a voice in Ottawa given the virtual absolute power conferred on the governing party by our current system.

Inequality of representation does not get much more undemocratic than FPTP ... except for the Preferential Ballot system which would have given the Liberal Party an even greater majority, nearly 2% of the available seats for every 1% of the popular vote (66.3% of the seats on the strength of only 39.5% of the popular vote) while relegating the opposition parties to 1% of the seats for every 2% of the popular vote (33.7% of seats on the strength of 60.5% of the popular vote).

An analysis of historical Canadian electoral data only confirms these findings which make a mockery of representative democracy.

Even in the last instance that a Canadian political party received an actual majority - the PC party of Brian Mulroney with a bare majority of 50.03% of the popular vote in 1984 - it was awarded 211 of the 282 seats in parliament, a whopping 74.8% while the 49.97% of Canadians who voted for other parties received a combined 25.2% of the representatives.

Put another way, half of the population was represented by 3X as many parliamentarians as the other half! Call me a stickler for statistics but, having half the Canadian people represented by 3 X as many parliamentarians as the other half does not come close to meeting my criterion for a democratic system in which its citizens are equally represented.

One of the main arguments put forward in opposition to Proportional Representation is that it almost always produces minority governments which limits the ruling party's ability to pass legislation, to "get things done"! Again a comparison of legislative achievements in cases of minority and majority governments is in order.

A majority government has incredible, almost dictatorial power. The Prime Minister can enact whatever policy s/he likes, so long as s/he has the confidence of his cabinet and the members of his/her party. And s/he can use the threat of demotion or expulsion from the party in order to enforce "party discipline" (keep party members in line). The only check on the Prime Minister of a majority government is the extremely rare threat of internal revolt by his/her own PMs. The Prime Minister has far more power than the President of the United States.

As the Liberal Sponsorship Scandal demonstrated majority governments can much more easily abuse their mandate. The Chretien government demonstrated when it funnelled \$150 million into Quebec in order to influence the NO vote on separation. In the article referenced here the Toronto Star details the abuses of power by the Harper government, although it should be noted that not all of them occurred during his majority mandate.
(<https://www.thestar.com/news/federal-election/2015/08/14/a-conservative-collection-of-harper-government-scandals.html>)

"A minority government ... cannot simply use party discipline to guarantee support in the legislature. Instead, it must negotiate with opposition parties to gain their support for government legislation." (<http://mapleleafweb.com/features/minority-governments-canada>)

The 1963 minority government of Lester Pearson was one of the most constructive, most productive, most progressive governments in the history of Canada as it worked in close concert with the [New Democratic Party](#) (NDP) to introduce “game changing”, indeed “life changing”, progressive social change for Canadians including the Canada Pension Plan, a new Canadian flag, and Universal Health Care, Canada’s most cherished social program!
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_minority_governments_in_Canada)

The “breakdown in the shared understanding of the unwritten parts of our constitution — the constitutional conventions — ... now allows a prime minister to exercise a particular set of sweeping powers ... summoning, proroguing and dissolving the House of Commons. In other words, the prime minister seems to have the unchecked power to decide when the House should be in session, when elections should occur, and even, in some circumstances, when their governments do or do not have the confidence of the House.” (<http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/mark-d-jarvis-lori-turnbull-canadian-prime-ministers-have-too-much-power>)

The “impact on Canadian society (of minority governments) has ... been great. The following provides a list of key policies and initiatives undertaken by federal minority governments: (<http://mapleleafweb.com/features/minority-governments-canada>)

- Old age pension, 1925, Mackenzie King’s minority Liberal government agreed to implement old age pension legislation to keep the support of Progressive and Labour Party MPs. The legislation was implemented in 1927.
 - Universal Health Care, Canada Student Loans program, Canada Assistance Plan (CAP), Canada Pension Plan, 1960s, by Pearson's minority Liberal government in close cooperation with the NDP.
 - Between 1972 and 1974, Trudeau introduced a program of economic nationalism that included the creation of PetroCanada. In addition, old age pensions were indexed to the cost of living. Again, this was due in part to the close cooperation between the Liberals and NDP during Trudeau's minority government.
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Proportional Representation (PR) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multi-party_system)

“Proportional representation better reflects the range of a population's views.

Proportional systems have [multi-member districts](#) with more than one representative elected from a given district to the same legislative body, and thus a greater number of viable parties. [Duverger's Law](#) states that the number of viable political parties is one plus the number of seats in a district.”

“[Brazil](#), [Denmark](#), [Finland](#), [Germany](#), [India](#), [Indonesia](#), [Ireland](#), [Israel](#), [Italy](#), [Mexico](#), The [Netherlands](#), [New Zealand](#), [Norway](#), [Pakistan](#), [Portugal](#), [Romania](#), [Serbia](#), [South Africa](#), [South Korea](#), [Spain](#), [Sri Lanka](#), [Sweden](#), and [Philippines](#) are examples of nations that have used a multi-party system effectively in their democracies. In these countries, usually no single party has a parliamentary majority by itself. Instead, multiple political parties form [coalitions](#) for the purpose of developing power blocks for governing.”

A multi-party system prevents the leadership of a single party from controlling a single [legislative](#) chamber without challenge.

First-past-the-post is not conducive to a proliferation of parties, and naturally gravitates toward a [two-party system](#), in which only two parties have a real chance of electing their candidates to office. This gravitation is known as [Duverger's law](#). Proportional representation, on the other hand, does not have this tendency, and allows multiple major parties to arise. But, recent [coalition](#) governments, such as that in the U.K., represent two-party systems rather than multi-party systems. This is regardless of the number of parties in government.

A two-party system requires voters to align themselves in large blocs, sometimes so large that they cannot agree on any overarching principles. Some theories argue that this allows [centrists](#) to gain control. On the other hand, if there are multiple major parties, each with less than a majority of the vote, the parties are strongly motivated to work together to form working governments. This also promotes centrism, as well as promoting coalition-building skills while discouraging polarization.”

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