

An “instant run-off” ballot would be the best way to reform Canada’s electoral system

By Jim Cooperman

The first-past-the-post electoral system is very unfair because it often results in MPs being elected who receive less than fifty percent of the vote and creates governments that represent far less than fifty percent of the electorate. Canada is primarily a progressive nation, yet because there are two major progressive parties, the progressive vote gets split between the two parties, often allowing the conservative party to rule. We do need a new system that will correct this problem.

Conservatives are calling for a referendum, because they know that if voters are allowed to decide, the results would likely be no changes, which could allow them to one day rise to power again through vote splitting. The NDP and Green parties are already pushing for proportional representation because this system provides the best opportunity for these parties to receive the largest number of seats in parliament.

There is a strong movement promoting proportional representation as the best voting system, because it ensures that the proportion of political parties elected matches the proportion of the vote that went to each party. However, this concept is flawed in that it equates voters to political parties, whereas most voters are individuals, who do not belong to political parties and may vote differently in each election.

In order to work, proportional representation requires a group of MPs who do not represent a constituency, but rather a political party. And these MPs would be chosen by the party, rather than by voters. Either the number of MPs would need to be vastly increased, or the size of each constituency with an elected MP would have to be much larger. One of the current flaws with our democracy now, is that political parties have too much power over how MPs vote and proportional representation would only exacerbate the problem.

Each party would need to create a list of potential MPs ready to go to Ottawa in order for the proportion to be equivalent to the percentage of votes the party receives in each election. How these representatives are chosen would be up to each party without input from constituencies or voters, which hardly seems democratic.

Canada is a huge country with many distinct regions; each with different needs and issues and each deserve to be well represented in parliament. Ideally, each MP should be in Ottawa representing their constituency and voting based on what his or her constituents support, rather than what their party dictates. Thus, to be truly democratic, the electoral system should result in a MP who is supported by the majority of their constituents.

It would be best if voters had the opportunity to vote a second time as is done in France whenever the first election does not result in a clear winner who received more than 50 percent of the vote. After all, if the goal is to elect the best candidate who has the most support, then voters should have the option for a second chance to pick the candidate they think will best represent their interests in Ottawa.

The voting system that purportedly provides a two-round run-off vote is called preferential or ranked balloting. This system uses a ranking system with second and third choices, which could result in votes being wasted on candidates that receive few votes.

A better option could be a single ballot that has two sections; the second section allows voters to choose amongst the various options should there be no clear winner in the first round. For example, if candidates from four parties are running, voters would pick one in the first section and in the second section of the ballot, they would pick their choice for each of the six possibilities of the two potential candidates with the highest number of votes.

The run-off options would be listed in the order that matches the number of votes each party received in the last election. That way only one of the top three options would have a statistical chance of becoming the run-off choice. The other options would be listed out of fairness to all the candidates. Ballot counting may occur in two steps. If there were no clear winner in the first round, those counting the ballots would have to circle the top two candidates and then record the second vote.

Many Canadians switch their party allegiance from election to election and with this system they will have the opportunity to switch in order to vote for their second choice. This system offers real choice for Canadians, rather than being “fair” to political parties.

Canada is finally on track to adopt a new electoral system that will do a better job of ensuring future governments are more representative of the majority of voters. Canadians need to become engaged and realize that what defines fair voting should be fair for their communities and their needs. And giving more power to political parties will not improve their governance. We need MPs who will better represent their constituencies and thus help reduce the influence of political parties in Canada’s parliamentary system.

Sample “Instant run-off ballot”:

ADAMS, John Blue Party	<input type="radio"/>
CARTER, Mary Orange Party	<input type="radio"/>
GEORGE, Michael Red Party	<input type="radio"/>
SAMPSON, Ruth Green Party	<input type="radio"/>
Run-off Choices	
If no candidate above receives a majority	
Option One	
ADAMS, John Blue Party	<input type="radio"/>
CARTER, Mary Orange Party	<input type="radio"/>
Option Two	
ADAMS, John Blue Party	<input type="radio"/>
GEORGE, Michael Red Party	<input type="radio"/>
Option Three	
ADAMS, John Blue Party	<input type="radio"/>
SAMPSON, Ruth Green Party	<input type="radio"/>
Option Four	
CARTER, Mary Orange Party	<input type="radio"/>
GEORGE, Michael Red Party	<input type="radio"/>
Option Five	
CARTER, Mary Orange Party	<input type="radio"/>
SAMPSON, Ruth Green Party	<input type="radio"/>
Option Six	
GEORGE, Michael Red Party	<input type="radio"/>
SAMPSON, Ruth Green Party	<input type="radio"/>