

Why Canada Should Adopt the Single Transferable Vote (STV) for Federal Elections

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Summary

This brief explains the weaknesses of the current First Past the Post electoral system (FPTP). Next, it discusses the advantages of the Single Transferable Vote (STV). Also explained is how the alternative MMP system is inferior to STV. Finally, the STV electoral system is recommended for Canada's federal elections.

What is wrong with our present First Past the Post electoral system?

Canada's electoral system is fundamentally flawed, and it should be reformed. For a vivid illustration of the pitfalls inherent in any first-past-the-post voting system (FPTP), we only need to look across our southern border at the current US presidential election. The two leading candidates, Trump and Clinton, are strongly disliked by approximately half of US registered voters. Yet polls indicate that one or the other of these historically unpopular candidates will likely be elected as President.

There are two main reasons why Americans are being so poorly served by their FPTP presidential electoral system:

1. Strategic voting: US presidential elections are always dominated by the two leading parties. Third-party candidates usually have no realistic chance of winning. Hence, third-party supporters tend to vote not for their favorite candidate, but instead for one of the two leading candidates, mainly to prevent victory by the candidate they abhor the most.

For example, if you dislike Clinton, but you absolutely loathe Trump, your best option is to vote for Clinton, just to defeat Trump. Even though you dislike Clinton, there is no point in voting for someone else who has no chance of winning. For example, voting for your favorite third-party candidate will only deprive Clinton of your vote, which will only increase the odds that Trump will win. Thus many voters feel compelled to vote not

for the candidate they like the best, but instead, *against* the candidate they detest.

2. Limited choice: Recognizing the inevitability of strategic voting in America's FPTP system, Michael Bloomberg decided in early 2016 not to run as an independent presidential candidate. His stated reason was that he did not want to siphon votes away from Clinton, because that might allow Trump to win. While this decision was rational and realistic, it unfortunately deprived Americans of the opportunity to vote for Bloomberg.

Six months later, as American voters have become painfully aware of the two leading candidates' personal flaws, it seems that if Bloomberg had run, he might well have become the most popular candidate by now. But American voters cannot vote for him. He will not be on the ballot at all, thanks to America's FPTP voting system – and party politics.

If instead of FPTP, the presidential elections utilized ranked ballots, then voters' second and third choices would count, and voters would feel free to vote for alternate candidates. Cognizant of that, more candidates – such as Michael Bloomberg – would run. Furthermore, each party might opt to field more than one presidential candidate, allowing voters to choose for themselves. For example, a ranked ballot offering Clinton, Sanders, Bloomberg, Trump, Cruz, Bush, Stein, and Johnson would give American voters the democratic choice they deserve. Moreover, drawing upon the collective wisdom of the entire US population would likely be a more dependable way to choose the best possible President. But for now, Americans are stuck with their dysfunctional FPTP electoral system, and we can only hope that the consequences will not be catastrophic.

With the alarming US presidential campaign unfolding before our eyes, now is surely the time for Canadians to heed the dangers of FPTP and dysfunctional party politics. Now is the time to reform our electoral system. We need to make it more representative, and more effective at selecting the best possible leaders for Canada.

STV

The one electoral system that can best accomplish this vital goal is the Single Transferable Vote, or STV. The STV would eliminate the need for strategic voting, thereby allowing people to vote according to their true preferences. STV would also ensure that the various parties would be represented in Parliament in the same proportion as people voted for them. And it would allow independent candidates a fair chance to get elected.

MMP

A second electoral system choice would be Mixed Member Proportional Representation, or MMP. However, MMP is fundamentally flawed, because the "top-up" party list candidates would be appointed entirely by the parties. This would give the party leaders even more reward power. Hence it would cause candidates and MPs to be more obedient to the party leaders, and it would reduce healthy dissent. Moreover, the use of party lists would transfer choice and power from the voters to the party leaders. If anything, voters want more choice, not less. They want healthy debate in Parliament, not mere obedience. Giving political parties and their leaders even more power than they already have is not something Canadian voters have ever asked for, or would ever want.

Also, with MMP, none of the top-up candidates would be independents. Hence, independent MPs would likely play a smaller role in our government. This would further entrench party politics in our electoral system. And it would further reduce the effectiveness of Parliament, by reducing the diversity of opinions that are so crucial when discussing and criticizing bills before they become law. Therefore, MMP is not a good choice for Canada.

The Guiding Principles for Canadian Federal Electoral Reform

Our current FPTP electoral system does *not* satisfy the Guiding principles for Canadian federal electoral reform. Specifically,

1. **Minority rule:** FPTP often results in minority rule, because only a plurality of votes is required to win, and only one winner is allowed.
2. **Poor representation:** Even in a two-candidate race, 49% of voters will feel unrepresented if their preferred candidate loses with 49% of the vote.
3. **Strategic voting:** FPTP motivates many voters to vote strategically, instead of voting for their preferred candidate. The inevitable result is that just two parties dominate and take turns governing. Third parties and independents are always at a disadvantage, because they seem unlikely to win, so casting votes in their support seems a waste. Hence, third party candidates and independents typically do not get all the votes that Canadians would like to give them. Instead, many Canadians feel compelled to vote for the leading candidate, when they would actually prefer to elect someone else.

4. Gerrymandering: With FPTP, electoral district boundaries can be drawn so as to favor the election of a particular party with the bare minimum plurality of votes.
5. The Spoiler Effect: Even though third parties often do not win, they can still change the election outcome. For example, Ralph Nader attracted votes away from Al Gore, allowing George W. Bush to win. Thus, Ralph Nader was the "spoiler".

A Better Way

In sharp contrast, STV eliminates all of these disadvantages. It offers the advantages of ranked ballots and multi-member districts. And it does so without the disadvantages of the party lists employed by the MMP system.

STV satisfies the guiding principles for Canadian federal electoral reform in many ways, including the following:

1. STV will reflect the democratic will of Canadians

STV eliminates the need for strategic voting. Consequently, you can vote for whoever you like. If your first choice doesn't win, then your vote is transferred to your second choice candidate. If she doesn't win, then your vote is transferred to your third choice. And so on. Thus you can vote for a weak candidate, without wasting your vote.

Also, if a candidate receives, for example, 10% more votes than are necessary to win, then all the people who voted for him get their vote applied to their respective second choice candidates, weighted by 10%. Thus, you can vote for an extremely popular candidate without wasting your vote.

In addition, STV allows you to vote across party lines. In a multi-member district, you could conceivably elect a Conservative, a Liberal, an NDP, a Green, and an independent candidate. This is especially valuable if you believe the parties are less important than the candidates themselves, or if you prefer more balanced discussions in Parliament.

Furthermore, STV does not utilize party lists. Hence, voters get to do all the choosing.

With STV, independent candidates are just as likely to get elected as party-affiliated candidates. This is only fair – for the candidates, and for the voters.

Specifically, independent candidates can contribute a diversity of views that can enable Parliament to discuss and criticize bills more thoroughly, enabling Parliament to make better laws.

As well, STV allows independent candidates to run for election without distorting the election result as spoilers. Cognizant of that, more independent candidates will run for election, as they will not face the risks that concerned Michael Bloomberg, who wanted to avoid being Hillary Clinton's spoiler.

2. STV will inspire trust in our election results

STV is easy to use, because voters merely need to rank the candidates.

STV is simpler than MMP, because there are no party lists to understand.

STV is simpler than FPTP, to the extent that voters do not need to guess how other people will vote. This is because strategic voting is neither necessary nor useful.

STV elections can utilize paper ballots, which can be scanned optically for instant counting. These paper ballots also leave a paper record for further manual verification if desired.

STV elections yield much fairer results, so they are well worth the few extra calculations that are needed.

3. STV will foster civility, cohesion and openness in politics

With STV, citizens can vote for several candidates across party lines, and elect several candidates per riding. Hence a candidate who wants to be the second or third choice for a voter, will avoid personally insulting the voter's first-choice candidate, as that could offend the voter. This will foster more discussion of the issues, rather than personal attacks.

FPTP tends to entail fear-mongering during election campaigns. For example, a leading candidate might invent horror stories about her chief opponent. The aim might be to scare voters into abandoning any third-party spoiler candidates who might otherwise siphon votes away. This would not happen with STV, as it renders strategic voting unnecessary and useless. The leading candidates have no need to

worry about votes being siphoned away, provided that weak third party candidate's supporters select the leading candidate as their second choice.

4. STV will make MPs more accountable to voters

There is a pervasive conflict of interest in our parliamentary system: Some MPs demonstrate more accountability to their party leadership than to their constituents. Granted, they do like to *appear* accountable to their constituents, especially during election campaigns, but elections are usually several years apart. Between elections, the Prime Minister wields considerable reward power with his ability to appoint cabinet members. Similarly, the opposition leader wields reward power by naming MPs to shadow-cabinet positions. No doubt, there is also considerable peer pressure from other MPs to vote loyally along party lines, regardless of constituents' preferences.

In contrast, STV's multi-MP ridings allow constituents access to more than one MP. Hence, constituents would notice any differences in accessibility and responsiveness among their MPs. The resulting competition between MPs in each riding would result in greater responsiveness and accountability.

In single-MP ridings, an MP needs only to satisfy his core supporters. After all, the MP needs to win only a plurality of votes to get re-elected. Hence, he may tend to ignore his other constituents. In contrast, with STV, if one MP ignores certain voters, the riding's other MPs will likely be more accommodating. Again, the competition between MPs within a riding will encourage all the MPs to be responsive and accessible to all the constituents.

With STV, the various MPs in a riding may be affiliated with different parties, so it will be easier for constituents with differing views to find a sympathetic ear.

With STV, a party-affiliated MP has a realistic chance of being re-elected in the future as an independent candidate. This is because voters can vote for their preferred candidate, rather than having to vote strategically. Knowing this, party-affiliated MPs will feel freer to disagree with their party's policies, or even leave the party, because it is apparently feasible to run independently in the next election. Hence, MPs can vote according to their constituents' wishes, regardless of party policies. Thus, the MPs will be more accountable to voters, not just to their party.

With FPTP, a minor swing in voter sentiment can lead to the ouster of an entire government. In contrast, with STV, a change in public mood might cause an MP to be demoted to the voters' second choice, but still get re-elected. Thus, experienced, capable MPs would tend to keep their seats longer. This would preserve more of the productive relationships between MPs and their constituents, along with a sense of long-term accountability.

5. STV will allow and encourage political participation across diverse segments of our society

One key reason why people don't bother to vote is that they feel their vote won't make any difference. In a sense, they are right, because with FPTP, some Canadian elections have been won with less than 40% of the vote, leaving 60% of voters feeling frustrated and unrepresented. In contrast, with STV and multi-member ridings, most of that 60% will be represented.

Anyway, if the residents of a riding have diverse views, then they can be better served by having more than one MP. Thus, STV will allow Canada's diverse citizens to be better represented. This will alleviate the frustration and the pervading sense of futility that has discouraged voting and political participation.

Another key reason why people don't bother to vote is the need for strategic voting in the FPTP system. That is, many people feel compelled to vote *not* for the candidate they really prefer, but instead for whoever seems most able to defeat the candidate they most abhor.

In contrast, STV eliminates the need for strategic voting, so citizens can vote for whichever candidate they really prefer, without feeling that their vote is wasted.

Relevant Videos

I highly recommend the following two videos, which discuss these issues effectively and succinctly.

1. The first explains the mechanics of STV, including how surplus votes are weighted for redistribution ("transfer value"):
BC-STV Animation https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-4_yuK-K-k
2. The second explains the flaws in the FPTP system:
The Problems with First Past the Post Voting Explained
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7tWHJfhiyo>

Recommendation

Canada should adopt the Single Transferable Vote for our federal elections, instead of the current FPTP system. Neither FPTP nor MMP is an adequate solution.

My Thanks

I thank our MPs and the Prime Minister for inviting all Canadians to be heard on this issue.