

Shirley Turnbull  
Introduction to Political Science II  
POLI 278  
Jeff Potkins  
May 31, 2016

### **Electoral Reform: No For Now**

*If our Canadian electoral system is to be reformed, Canadians must be assured that what comes next will be an improvement on the status quo. Discussions about electoral reform should include questions of stability and the representation of minority interests, however, one is seen as a trade-off against the other. Is the composition of Parliament less important in Canada or should Parliament continue to be structured to act in the interests of the citizens? The Proportional Representation school looks at the composition of Parliament while majoritarians look to its decisions. Outcomes of electoral systems are conditioned by many factors and judgment on which electoral system is best for Canada should be made in light of our history, social composition, and political structures.*

The perception that something is wrong with a political system will impel electoral reform onto the political agenda. A primary mechanical effect of an electoral system and one re-occurring and indisputably strained value in Canada is proportionality. Proportional Representation (PR) systems seem to score well on this criterion, however, factors, such as district magnitude and legal thresholds advances other sources of disproportionality in PR.<sup>1</sup> Alternative Vot-

---

<sup>1</sup> Moser, Robert G. *Electoral Systems and Political Context*, 1st Edition. Cambridge University Press, 20120928. VitalSource Bookshelf Online.

ing (AV) is quite similar to First Past the Post (FPTP) systems as both use single member districts, but since it is not possible to allocate one single seat proportionately, this also leads to disproportional outcomes.

## **First Past the Post**

In Single Member Plurality (SMP) systems, FPTP works exactly as it should, which isn't the ideal system for a multi-party democracy. Regardless that FPTP produces questionable majorities, a plurality created by a small vote differential between the leading parties often produces a stable single-party government. The centralized power structure viewed as authoritarian is contradictorily fought in local geographical areas where local party members select the candidates themselves with minimal interference from the national party. This geographic accountability is important to Canadians because elected members represent their constituency, regardless of who voted for them or not, rather than just the party they belong to, and they can be removed if they ignore the needs of their constituency. The ability to change governments is one of the most important capabilities of FPTP.

SMP systems are perceived as exerting a constraining effect on party systems. The number of parliamentary parties is much lower than PR, however, it does not constrain the proliferation of parties in elections.<sup>2</sup> The system is also accused of hindering the entry of minorities and

---

<sup>2</sup> Jansen, Harold J. 2004. The Political Consequences Of The Alternative Vote: Lessons from Western Canada. *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne De Science Politique* 37 (03): 647-69.

women and for creating an authoritarian government.<sup>3</sup> The current 30-member cabinet has successfully achieved gender balance without the need for change in electoral systems. The PR concept of descriptive representation that legislature should ‘mirror the nation’ is reflected where policy has effectively promoted candidates from historically underrepresented segments of society. The system, therefore, cannot be said to inadequately represent the will of the people. A 1992 Royal Commission Report confirmed that increasing minority/gender representation is not an overriding concern within parties in Canada, though it is argued relentlessly by PR activists.

### **Proportional Representation**

PR is relatively efficient in translating vote shares into seat shares, but formal thresholds and low district magnitudes are barriers that keep marginalized electoral parties from becoming legislative parties, having serious effects on the outcome of PR systems. Some claim that PR systems destroy the constituency link between elected Members of Parliament (MP) and the voters they represent in their districts.<sup>4</sup> Candidate selection varies from system to system, but usually, voters are confined to a one party list where selection is controlled by the party elites. Very few wasted votes contribute to the overall layout of seats in the legislature, argumentatively, this presents a trade-off, either you have a representative government, or you have a strong and stable government. Canadian political structures are organized in a way that it acts on behalf of the interests of the citizens, thus, removing the territorial link might encourage voters to disengage.

---

<sup>3</sup> Blais, Andre, and Oxford University Press. 2008. *To Keep Or To Change First Past the Post?*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Henderson, Ailsa. "Consequences of Electoral Reform: Lessons for Canada." *Canadian Public Policy / Analyse De Politiques* 32, no. 1 (2006): 41-58.

Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) systems are considered to be the “best of both worlds” (Shugart and Wattenberg, 2001) because they combine single member district representation with proportional outcome. Voters may choose from a list of candidates and a list of political parties, allowing a voter to choose a local candidate while also supporting a different party. However, the party vote is used to determine the final composition of Parliament. The defining element of MMP is that the district vote is not as valuable as the party vote, so the seats gained are not from constituency ballots but from the party list if the proportions of constituency seats do not match the proportions of the party vote. In closed list elections, voters have no influence in ranking the candidates listed, therefore, voting for a local candidate does not entail a similar commitment to the candidate’s party, and problems arise when elected representatives’ roles are not clear. This system may produce two classes of MPs which all parties in Canada are intent on avoiding.<sup>5</sup>

For most Canadians the functioning of the mechanism that reconciles the constituency results with the national results is unclear. Studies found that voters appear insecure with the loss of single-party governments and an increasing lack of support for coalition governments which produces low levels of voter confidence (Henderson, Alisa (2006) 41-58). A system like PR where smaller parties can only participate in a coalition government after an election produces accountability between party elites and elected officials instead of a relationship between the government and the electorate. In PR, options before voting are unclear and continued battles in the legislature to either maintain or form coalitions causes instability which impedes new poli-

---

<sup>5</sup> LeDuc, Lawrence. 2011. Electoral Reform And Direct Democracy In Canada: When Citizens Become Involved. *West European Politics* 34 (3) (05/01): 551-67.

cies from being implemented until Parliament is sorted out. “There’s little connection between elections and the creation of governments” (Katz 1997a 165-7).

Canadian’s electoral preferences and support patterns have found that voters are likely to defect strategically from their top electoral choice. Strategic voting usually occurs within ideological groups and rarely across them so knowing what we do about the first and second preferences of Canadians, strategic voting consequently will favour the centrist party which will constrain party proliferation. PR systems are to provide voters who lack a clear party preference with a set of strategic incentives. However, they are overshadowed by strategic voting practices that produce distortions of proportionality.<sup>6</sup> One can game any electoral system, and the polity will crack it in no time.

### **Alternative Voting (Preferential Balloting)**

AV may appeal to Canadian voters because it addresses the issue of MPs being elected with minority support. Under AV, if no candidate reaches 50% after the first count, the candidate who received the least votes is removed from the election and the subsequent preferential votes for that candidate are redistributed. This continues until a candidate receives 50%. The MP being elected with a majority includes the share of votes preferred for other parties and this is hardly a ringing endorsement. The remaining wasted vote (described as a recycled vote) is where the second or third vote is given equal right to the first preference resulting in a legislature where the number of seats won by the parties no way reflects how people initially voted. It is

---

<sup>6</sup> Karp, Jeffrey A. "Political Knowledge About Electoral Rules: Comparing Mixed Member Proportional Systems In Germany and New Zealand." *Electoral Studies* 25, no. 4 (2006): 714-730.

really a forced choice between the top two candidates, and we should question whether a majority attained after a third preference is more legitimate than one elected in plurality systems. “It violates equal treatment of voters by treating the subsequent preferences as equivalent to first preferences which undermine democratic legitimacy” (Jansen, Harold J. 2004). A candidate elected with 50% on first preferences functionally is no different than FPTP.

AV falls short of fulfilling the goal of increased public engagement with politics. Part of AV’s attraction is to practice consensual politics by encouraging coalitions to form, but there is little support in the Canadian experience to suggest this. It may play a significant role in democracies where parties already had committed to electoral cooperation before the parties adopted AV, but in the partisan context which Canadian electoral systems operate, the adoption of AV would not lead to similar political behaviour here.<sup>7</sup>

The use of AV adoption in Manitoba, Alberta and British Columbia proves that AV is just as likely as FPTP systems to reduce the number of parties elected to the legislature.<sup>8</sup> In these cases, the emergence of new electoral parties prompted dominant parties to elect AV to try to stem their increasing influences. Arguably, AV was a response to, not the cause of, the changing character of the party systems having an ambivalent impact on party competition.

## **Conclusion**

---

<sup>7</sup> Farrell, David M. 2011. *Electoral Systems, A Comparative Introduction 2nd Edition*, Palgrave MacMillan, Hampshire: 153-171

<sup>8</sup> Gschwend, Thomas, and Henk van der Kolk. "Split Ticket Voting In Mixed Member Proportional Systems: The Hypothetical Case Of The Netherlands." *Acta politica* 41, no. 2 (2006): 163-179.

The evidence at our disposal is not clear as to whether we want a switch to AV since it would not result in more proportional outcomes than FPTP. Switching to PR may give us more accurate representation, but if that's where it stops, we would be trading in one set of democratic ills for another. An important factor in electoral reform is that a governing party sees advantages in promoting reform. It is tough for a leading party to resist the temptation to choose a system which will benefit them. Reform agendas seem always to be on the table as a sign they do not want a new electoral system, but will support it or fear electoral retribution if they are seen as opposing reform. Because AV systems produces majority governments this may attract the attention of dominant parties who are less likely to adopt a system that would guarantee no outright majority. Canadian studies have shown, over time, individuals are less likely to see political issues and events through party lenses, reinforcing the constituency link. (Dalton, 2000). Canada with parties which are largely regionally based, focuses predominantly on a given region's interests. An informed policy debate about electoral reform in Canada must acknowledge that this regionalism is a key issue, thus, expectations of preferred systems will less likely match political outcome.