

Electoral Reform

For the Canadian Special Committee on Electoral Reform

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http://iqualia.ca/wp_er/

Summary

This proposal:

- Eliminates “First Past the Post”;
- Implements proportional representation;
- Partly affects both the House of Commons and the Senate;
- Employs an easy to use ballot;
- Requires only a few simple modifications;
- Includes a brief analysis of each change; and,
- Addresses all of the Committee’s mandates.

Achieving Local and Proportional Representation

The two main representations in Parliament are the elected members to the House of Commons from each local district, and the appointed members of the Senate from the larger Provincial and Territorial regions.

The current debate is about how to make the House of Commons more relevant to voters, how to reform the Senate, which is supposed to be less politically oriented and more sober and cerebral, and how to ensure proportional representation.

However, trying to add proportional representation into local elections inevitably complicates the process, by requiring:

- A variable number of representatives;
- Confusing balloting schemes; or,
- Electing some candidates that haven't earned the most votes.

As well, the current method for appointing Senators unfairly favours the presiding government, which often uses its unique advantage to appoint only like-minded members. This makes it difficult for broader ideas from other political parties gaining any foothold into the Senate chambers.

The essential problem is that local and proportional representation are mutually exclusive, and this proposal seeks to overcome that by splitting these two interests more clearly and definitively between the House of Commons and the Senate.

The solution presented next requires only a few simple changes.

The House of Commons

The first change involves the House of Commons, which continues to reflect local representation, but without relying on the undesirable “First Past the Post” system.

Federal elections would use a simplified version of Preferential Voting, which is similar to the method already used to elect the leaders within the Liberal and Conservative parties.

- As it is now, the country is divided into local districts, and each Party supplies up to one entrant for each race, together with any number of Independent candidates.
- Voters in each district—marking a ballot similar to what we use now—select their preferred candidate, and if they wish, provide any number of ordered alternatives.
- If no candidate receives a simple majority of votes (greater than 50 percent), the one with the least number of votes is eliminated and their ballots are redistributed based on their next ordered alternative, if specified.
- This process is repeated until one candidate finally receives a simple majority, electing the most favourable representative for that district.
- In the extremely rare event that a tie vote occurs, even after recounts are conducted, new elections for that district would be held.

As a result, voters will be more likely to elect one of their preferred candidates, which would not be the case with “First Past the Post”.

In summary, the changes to the House of Commons involves moving from a “First Past the Post” system, to using a simple preferred ballot format in order to elect members with a greater than 50 percent majority.

Impact

It is impossible to know for sure what differences might have occurred in the last election with this change, because voters never indicated alternative choices. But a poll could be conducted to gain such information and determine what the likely outcome could have been.

It is known, however, that many voters switched their votes away from their preferred candidate in order to influence the final outcome. Allowing voters to specify alternate choices should lessen the need or desire to engage in that practice.

Because voters are more likely to end up with their preferred candidate elected, and because elected members are more likely to gain a wider mandate as a result, this should strengthen the connection between voters and their representatives.

As an additional benefit, because reporting on results must wait until a simple majority is determined, early results will be less common and so less likely to have an effect on staggered voting across different time zones.

The Senate

The next change involves the Senate, so that it better reflects the country's proportional political preference, while still maintaining the ability to select and appoint the best, most thoughtful representatives.

- Each Party must have a candidate in each district where they want their popular preference tallied. Independent candidates do not have direct representation in the Senate.
- Only a voter's first choice on their ballot counts towards Party preference in the Senate, even if an alternate choice for a different Party was used to elect a candidate to the House of Commons.
- Party preference is used to determine how many seats that Party should have in the Senate, and the order in which a Party may select a new Senator should a vacancy exist (see Formulas below).
- The Party with the first option to select must offer up a candidate for appointment within a reasonable period of time, or defer to the next Party in order. A Party may have to defer if they are unable to maintain correct Provincial and Territorial counts.
- As it does today, the Governor General continues to appoint Senators. But now it does so on the advice of Party leaders, not the Prime Minister. All other regulations regarding Senators continue to apply.

This method maintains the Senate as a place of long-term “sober second thought” while allowing more Parties the opportunity to widen the range of thought and opinion, and that better reflect the country's political landscape.

In summary, the changes to the Senate involves replacing the advice to the Governor General from the Prime Minister to each Party leader, using a simple ballot and formula to determine proportional representation.

Impact

The Senate currently has 35 Senators chosen by Liberal leaders, 50 Senators by Conservative leaders, and 20 seats left vacant.

If this new method had already been in place for some time, the list of Senators might look more like 41 by Liberals, 34 by Conservatives, 21 by NDP, 5 by Bloc Quebecois, and 4 by the Green Party, with no vacant seats.

This stands in stark contrast to the current system, where even a major Party like the NDP has never had the opportunity to select a Senator.

The Senate would not change rapidly by this process, but evolve slowly over time as seats become vacant, ensuring that it retains its long-term sober nature. Nor does it prevent Senators from being politically agnostic, as many are now. The only change is the manner in which they are appointed.

Because this method can benefit even smaller parties unlikely to ever form a government, it may encourage new alliances that reduce the fragmentation of the political spectrum, which already includes over twenty national parties.

And because the Senate would reflect a wider range of political thought and opinion, it should encourage greater participation by Canadians in the political process.

Formula for Party Seats

The Party Seats scores are kept as fractions. Round them to see how many seats each Party should have.

$$PS = PV * TS$$

Where,

PS = Party Seats - the number of seats the Party should have by popular vote.

PV = Popular Vote - percent popular vote from the most recent election.

TS = Total Seats - total number of senate seats, currently set at 105.

Formula for Selection Order

Parties with lower Selection Order scores have precedence over higher scores when deciding which Party gets to select next. If the PS score is less than 0.5, no option to select is given.

$$SO = CS / PS$$

Where,

SO = Selection Order - the order in which a Party can select a new Senator.

CS = Current Seats - the number of seats the Party currently occupies.

PS = Party Seats - the number of seats the Party should have by popular vote.

The Ballot

The last change concerns the ballot used to record a voter's preferences. It is designed to be both familiar and more flexible.

- Each ballot lists the district candidates in random order, along with their party affiliation, and a large space next to each one to mark voter preference.
- Valid voter markings are a single X, and numbers (1, 2, 3, and so on).
- If present, an X is always the first choice over any number. Numbers then indicate the preferred order of each alternate candidate. Unmarked candidates are ignored.
- Ballots are always valid up to the point where you can no longer determine the next preferred candidate. If no first choice can be determined, the entire ballot is spoiled.
- The Party associated with the first choice candidate also counts as the Party preference for proportional representation in the Senate. Independents are not counted.

In summary, the changes to the ballot are minimal, allowing for a simple mark of an X, adding the option to indicate alternative order, and a way to indicate their Party preference for the Senate.

Impact

The simple design of this ballot accommodates a range of voters: those that just want to select their choice and leave, and those that want greater input into which candidate gets elected.

New strategies may also emerge.

Canadians favouring less popular political parties may use their first choice to influence the Senate, and their second choice to pick the local representative they can live with.

Because voters have more options, this new method should encourage greater voter turnout and participation in the political process.

Sample Ballot

Janet Pearson, Conservative ()
Frank Doubleday, Independent ()
Tina Abelson, Liberal ()
Barry H Thompson, NDP ()

Example Markings for Sample Ballot

For the example markings below, read across as if down the sample ballot above.

() () (X) ()

- **Order:** Tina
- **Party:** Liberal

(2) (1) () (X)

- **Order:** Barry, Frank, Janet
- **Party:** NDP
- The X takes precedence over the 1.

() (2) () (3)

- **Order:** Frank, Barry
- **Party:** None
- Numbers don't have to start with a 1, as you can still tell which order the voter wanted. Independents do not have representation in the Senate.

(X) () (2) ()

- **Order:** Janet, Tina
- **Party:** Conservative

(1) (1) (2) (X)

- **Order:** Barry
- **Party:** NDP
- The two 1's prevent further preferences, but the X still counts as the first choice.

Spoiled Ballots

These ballots are spoiled because no first choice can be determined.

() () () ()

(X) () (X) ()

() (1) (2) (1)

Mandate Compliance

Effectiveness and Legitimacy

This method ensures that more voters are likely to have their preferred candidates elected to parliament, by allowing for alternative selections in the event their first choice doesn't win.

As a result, voter disappointment or disillusionment in the process would be reduced.

Engagement

This method assures Canadian voters that those with minor political opinions will more likely be heard, even if only in the Senate, reducing any sense of exclusion from the process.

It also ensures that their preferred candidate has the best opportunity to be elected, through other voter's preferences, encouraging better participation in the overall voting process.

Accessibility and Inclusiveness

This method, while adding the ability to specify alternate choices and Party preference, maintains the same simple format for voting that is already familiar to all Canadians, making it easy to understand and just as accessible regardless of physical or social conditions.

As well, a voter's political opinion is more likely to be heard, through a more representative Senate process that can accommodate smaller political parties.

Integrity

This method uses the same reliable and verifiable process of issuing, recording, and counting ballots as the current system, although with some additional reporting of results, and with the same level of security and objectivity for individual Canadians.

Local Representation

This method ensures that the most favourable local candidate is elected in each district.

This gives voters more confidence that their interests will be represented, and gives elected members of parliament the knowledge that they have wider support from their local constituents.

This should encourage more and better interaction between Canadian citizens and their locally elected representatives.