

Think Hybrid: The Case for Ranked Ballot plus Proportional Representation

By Ian Sherman

It would be regrettable if the sigh of relief that accompanied the election of Justin Trudeau's Liberals gave way to complacency. Canadians should remain mindful that our current First Past the Post (FPTP) system -- which the Prime Minister has promised to retire -- allowed a government elected with less than 40 per cent of the popular vote to mount a systematic, autocratic assault on democratic principles.

Last December the Broadbent Institute released a comprehensive study on electoral reform which received praise from numerous Canadian groups deeply concerned that FPTP does not fairly represent each vote cast. Feedback heavily favoured an alternative system of proportional party representation (based on party percentages of the national popular vote) over a ranked ballot model.

Ranked ballot models allow voters to cast ordered preferential votes to best ensure that winners in each riding represent local opinion at greater than 50%. However, as with FPTP, a party can form a "majority" government with far less than 50% of the national popular vote. Clearly, ranked ballot models do not accurately link first preferential party votes with legislative power as do various proportional models.

While campaigning in the Liberal leadership race, Justin Trudeau expressed a personal preference for a ranked ballot model, expressing a wariness "of disconnecting any MPs from specific groups of citizens or geographic location." He went on to say that "The fact that every single politician needs to earn the trust of a specific group of constituents who cover the broad range of Canadian public opinion strengthens our democracy."

Commendably, Trudeau altered the composition of the joint committee on electoral reform to approximate party percentages of the popular vote in the 2015 election. However, despite the fact that some Liberal MPs have expressed support for proportional representation, Liberal fortunes would benefit from any argument that a ranked ballot option is straightforward means to offer voters more choice within a traditional format.

If Trudeau fails to gain committee support for that option, he might consent to a proportional model supported by minor parties while shrewdly bowing to Conservative demands for a referendum. Any complex proportional model will be a hard sell to many comfortable with the tradition of electing one's local MP at the riding level. And arguably, both status quo FPTP and a ranked ballot alternative favour the center left Liberals.

Given that provincial referendums on electoral reform have failed for just this reason, we need to consider a comprehensible hybrid model comprised of ranked ballot and proportional components. Such a hybrid would incorporate traditional voter preference and MP accountability at the riding level while rectifying the failure of both FPTP and ranked ballot models to represent that *broad range of Canadian public opinion*.

Considering the diminishing relevance of preferential choices, the ranked ballot component might simply offer voters just two preferential votes. The first, marked with either the traditional X or a 1, would continue to represent a voter's party of choice. Second preferences marked with a 2 would be added to candidate totals *only* if no candidate attained more than 50 per cent of all first preferential votes cast.

Adding in the second preferential votes to candidate totals would likely see winners in those closely contested ridings exceed 50 per cent of the total of all first and second votes cast. In any event, they would better represent the wishes of their constituents than would FPTP. Seating all elected MPs from the current 338

ridings would continue to fulfill the provincial proportional representation formula mandated by the Constitution.

The proportional component of this hybrid system would adjust a political party's voting power on the floor of the Commons to numerically reflect its percentage share of the national popular vote by multiplying that percentage times 338 seats. Adjusting a party's voting power according to the popular vote would raise a fundamental question as to what minimum percentage of the national tally constitutes a significant constituency of Canadian opinion.

Any party not achieving whatever minimum threshold was set would not qualify for proportionally adjusted voting power on the floor of the Commons. That threshold would likely be set within a range of five to 10 per cent of the popular vote. Hence, there would be no avenue for fringe parties to gum up the works thus refuting a well-worn argument against adopting proportional models in general.

The ranked ballot component would help well-established minor parties to increase their share of the popular vote given that their supporters would have second preference hedge votes in hand. And in aid of fortifying democracy the proportional component would inspire many absentee voters disillusioned with the present system to register and cast a vote, confident that their first preferential choice would now meaningfully count.

A hybrid model utilizing these two components would require a single party to achieve a significant 50 per cent plus total of the popular vote to act as a majority government. This would restrain radical political ideology while acknowledging the varied cultural and political landscape of Canada. Coalitions would highlight the compelling circumstance that we need to collaborate productively in the face of daunting challenges.

By enabling minor parties to exercise proportionally adjusted voting power Canadians would acknowledge the earned trust and support which singular voting constituencies extend to their party of choice and its stated policy objectives -- at the polls. Revitalizing our democracy in this manner would help to counter the opaque corporate lobbying presence that handcuffs the present FPTP system.

And simplicity is paramount in promoting any model that includes proportional representation. The clear-cut calculation that adjusts elected seats to voting seats in this proposed hybrid would also serve to proportion tallies of Yes and No votes during free votes. Electoral reform could also mandate that MPs be allowed to vote their conscience during party votes as well without losing their caucus status. The manner in which minor parties would express party opinion through their upwardly adjusted voting seats would be a point of debate.

Assigning candidates who ran second in closely contesting ridings to a virtual caucus representing added adjusted voting seats would be one option. Better yet, incorporating those candidates as actual flesh and blood voting members (though ones lacking the funded riding offices afforded elected members) would keep voting procedures on the floor of the Commons in line with the present system.

The tables below use Elections Canada data from the past two elections to flesh out this hybrid proposal. They show results using either a 3% or a 5% minimum popular vote threshold for a party to qualify for proportional seating. Had recent elections been conducted using this model, voter choice under the ranked ballot component would very likely have lessened the disparities between elected seats won and voting seats owed based on the national popular vote (43 seats in both 2015 and 2011).

Table 1

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Oct 2015 Election	Elected Seats	Percent of Seats Held	Popular Votes Cast Nationwide	Percent of Popular Vote Cast for Seated Parties	Voting Seats adjusted to Popular Vote (3% threshold)	Voting Seats Adjusted to Popular Vote (5% threshold)	Percentage of Voting Seats (5% threshold)
Liberal	184	54.44%	6,942,937	39.79%	134	142	42.04%
Conservative	99	29.29%	5,613,633	32.17%	109	115	33.99%
NDP	44	13.02%	3,469,368	19.88%	67	71	21.01%
Bloc Québécois	10	2.96%	821,144	4.71%	16	10	2.96%
Green Party	1	0.30%	602,933	3.46%	12	1	0.30%
Other			141,453				
Totals	338	100%	17,591,468	100%	338	339	100%

Table 2

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
May 2011 Election	Elected Seats	Percent of Seats Held	Popular Votes Cast Nationwide	Percent of Popular Vote Cast for Seated Parties	Voting Seats adjusted to Popular Vote (3% threshold)	Voting Seats Adjusted to Popular Vote (5% threshold)	Percentage of Voting Seats (5% threshold)
Conservative	166	53.90%	5,835,270	39.98%	123	128	41.61%
NDP	103	33.44%	4,512,411	30.92%	95	99	32.18%
Liberal	34	11.04%	2,783,076	19.07%	59	61	19.85%
Bloc Québécois	4	1.30%	891,425	6.11%	19	20	6.36%
Green Party	1	0.32%	572,095	3.92%	12	1	0.32%
Other			129,703				
Totals	308	100%	14,723,980	100%	308	309	100%

Spreadsheet math. The various fringe parties comprising **Other** in Column 3 collectively represent less than 1% of the popular vote, far below any reasonable threshold to qualify for proportional representation. Hence, the percentages in Columns 4 are calculated by subtracting votes for **Other** from the Column 3 total. Whenever a minor party fails to qualify for proportionally adjusted seats, its share of the popular vote must likewise be

subtracted from Column 3 so that the appropriate Column 7 totals 100%. Additionally, in calculating adjusted **Voting Seats** for parties which do qualify, the total of the elected seats for the minor parties which do not qualify must be subtracted from the Column 1 total so that appropriate Column 6 totals closely match the Column 1 **Elected Seats** total. Note as well that dividing a party's voting seats in Column 5 by the column total will yield a slightly different value than its corresponding popular vote percentage in Column 4. Those differences bear on decimal rounding which is fundamental to proportional models because electoral results based on percentages of the popular vote must necessarily be expressed in whole numbers. In Column 5 of Table 1, for instance, 134.49 rounded down to 134 while 108.68 rounded up to 109. Similar rounding bumped the voting seat total up one seat to 339 in Column 6 of Table 1 and to 309 in Column 6 of Table 2.