

Electoral Reform in Canada: Addressing the Democratic Deficit

B R I A N T A N G U A Y †

In recent years, politicians and pundits alike have grown increasingly concerned about the health of Canadian democracy. Jeffrey Simpson, the well-known columnist for *The Globe and Mail*, published *The Friendly Dictatorship* in 2001, in which he argued that Canada had become a de facto one-party state, much like Japan has been for most of the post-war period. In both cases, a single party dominates political life and monopolizes electoral politics, crowding out alternative voices and making many citizens question the value of their vote. If the outcome of an election is pretty much a foregone conclusion, why invest the energy needed to cast a ballot?

Paul Martin, before he replaced Jean Chrétien as leader of the Liberal Party and prime minister, gave an important speech on the subject of the “democratic deficit.” Martin noted that in the federal elections of 1997 and 2000, the number of people who did not vote at all exceeded the number of people who had voted for the winning party. For him, this disturbing fact was the equivalent of “the canary in the coalmine”: it pointed to fundamental flaws in our democratic system that need to be addressed by policy makers through meaningful institutional reforms, not merely papered over by cosmetic changes. Declining voter turnout—it reached a historic low of 60 per cent of registered voters in the 2004 federal election—is one symptom of the democratic deficit, or democratic malaise in Canada. Unhealthy levels of cynicism toward the political class are another: a distressingly high number of citizens view our politicians as corrupt liars who will do or say anything to get elected. And finally, the growing disengagement of young voters—barely one in five voters under the age of 24 bothers to cast a ballot—is one of the most worrisome trends in contemporary Canadian politics.

While politicians and many observers of the Canadian political scene agree that the system is in need of an overhaul, they disagree, sometimes vehemently, on the remedies that would improve its health and make it

† Brian Tanguay, Professor, Coordinator of Studies, Chair of Political Science, Wilfrid Laurier University.

more responsive to the needs and demands of ordinary citizens. The country went through a 15-year period (1980-1995) of intense and divisive constitutional debate, leaving most citizens and politicians exhausted and seemingly allergic to any further discussion of constitutional change, especially of the “mega” variety—Senate reform, entrenched distinct society clauses—which would necessitate a constitutional amendment.

It is in this context that electoral reform has emerged as an important option for those interested in improving the democratic responsiveness of our political system. A growing number of political parties, intellectuals and grassroots organizations—like Fair Vote Canada and Mouvement pour une démocratie nouvelle (MDN)—are calling for the replacement of Canada’s antiquated first-past-the-post electoral system with one that would be more equitable in its translation of votes into seats in Parliament. More importantly, five provinces (British Columbia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Quebec and Ontario) are currently either consulting their electorates on the desirability of implementing a new electoral system or have adopted legislation to that end.

ELECTORAL REFORM AND THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

Canada’s single-member simple plurality (SMP) or, more familiarly, first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system, which it inherited from Great Britain in the 18th century, is viewed by growing numbers of citizens as inherently unfair—more likely to frustrate or distort the wishes of the voters than to translate them faithfully into representation and influence in the legislature. Specifically, critics of FPTP contend that it:

- provides the first place finisher with an electoral “bonus” and thereby translates a plurality of votes into an artificial legislative majority; this is one of the chief reasons that the federal Liberal Party has been granted a seemingly permanent monopoly on power at the federal level;
- contributes to the regionalization of the country, and to the perception that the West, for example, is “Conservative” or “Reform” country, and that Ontario is a one-party (Liberal) bastion;
- allows the governing party, with its artificially swollen legislative majority, to dominate the political agenda almost completely for a period of four or five years, thereby contributing to the marginalization of Parliament;

- wastes a large number of votes—unless a voter supports the winning candidate in a given riding, there is no connection between the voter’s choice and the eventual make-up of the House of Commons;
- excludes new voices—like those in the Green Party, for instance—from the legislature;
- poses artificially high barriers to the election of women, minority and aboriginal candidates.

This is not to say that FPTP is entirely without merits: its simplicity, ease of understanding by the average voter, and ability to produce strong, stable majority governments are highly prized by many citizens and politicians. Nevertheless, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the drawbacks of our electoral system outweigh its advantages, and it is for this reason that electoral reform has moved toward the top of the political agenda in Canada, a country that has not been known in the last half-century for its willingness to experiment with alternative electoral formulae.

The Law Commission of Canada, an independent federal agency that advises Parliament on how to improve and modernize Canada’s laws, submitted a report to the Minister of Justice in March 2004 urging the adoption of a Mixed Member Proportional electoral system, similar to the one currently in use for the Scottish Parliament. This system would attempt to combine the best of both worlds: it would retain the traditional single-member constituencies that are such an important feature of first-past-the-post systems, but reduce their number by a third (to 202 in the existing House of Commons). It would then add 106 compensatory seats that would be distributed to the parties on the basis of their share of the vote in each province.

To take an example: Ontario would still have 106 seats in the new system, but only 70 of them would be traditional single-member constituencies. The remaining 36 seats would be awarded to candidates on lists drawn up by each party, according to each party’s share of the provincial vote. Voters would have two votes instead of one: one for the candidate in their riding and one for a political party (the list vote). They would be able to split their ticket by voting for a Liberal candidate in the riding, for example, but for the Green Party or NDP list.

If this mixed electoral system had been in place for the 2004 election, the number of seats obtained by each party would have been as follows (actual results are in parentheses):

Liberals	119	(135)
Conservatives	96	(99)
Bloc Québécois	38	(54)
NDP	45	(19)

Under this system, the Liberals and the NDP together would have had a workable majority in Parliament, which polls suggest was the outcome preferred by a plurality of Canadian voters. The Greens would have received about 3 per cent of the seats in Parliament with their 4 per cent of the vote. Representation for each of the parties would have been much more regionally balanced than is currently the case. The party lists could have been used to promote women and minority candidates, as is common practice in many Western European nations.

A number of criticisms have been made of this proposal. It is too complicated for the average voter, some critics say. Citizens in New Zealand and Scotland seem to have adapted fairly easily to the new rules, however. The most common complaints are that such a system would virtually guarantee minority or coalition governments, that it would create two different "castes" of MPs, and that it would encourage small extremist parties to spread like creeping charlie. If Canadians are genuinely worried about the latter possibility, then one way to deal with it would be to establish a threshold, say 5 per cent of the provincial vote, which each party would have to meet before it won seats in Parliament.

A mixed electoral system would inevitably produce two different types of parliamentary representative. Evidence from the countries that have adopted such systems, like Germany and New Zealand, suggests that the list and constituency MPs can learn to live together, although a period of adjustment and a great deal of mutual goodwill may be required. The proposed system would also guarantee minority or coalition governments. Such outcomes are the norm in most Western European countries and in New Zealand, and they do not routinely lead to unstable or ineffective government.

Canadians can look to the recent experience of New Zealand, which adopted a mixed member proportional system after two referendums on the subject were held in the early 1990s, in order to get some idea of the possible impact of electoral reform on democratic governance. The first, and most important conclusion to be drawn is that electoral reform is neither painless nor a panacea for all of a country's political ills. In New Zealand, there was considerable backlash initially against the new electoral system when it failed to immediately deliver some of the benefits promised by its advocates. It is therefore crucial not to oversell the potential of a new electoral system as a means of curing the democratic malaise in Canada.

The second conclusion that can be drawn from the New Zealand experience is that a mixed member electoral system *does* yield some very tangible benefits, such as improved chances of success for women and minority candidates. It also facilitates the election of minor party candidates (like those in the Green Party), which tend to be excluded

from the legislature under a first-past-the-post electoral formula. Thus the act of voting seems to be more meaningful for a greater number of citizens under MMP than it was in the old FPTP system. Moreover, the coalition governments produced by the new system have not been ineffective, in the sense of being unable to introduce new policies and programs. After nearly a decade of experience with the new system, a majority of New Zealanders appear to consider it to be an improvement over FPTP. This is a modest but nonetheless important improvement in the system of democratic governance in New Zealand, one that Canada would do well to imitate.

The issue of electoral reform turns mainly on this question: do Canadians value majority government and legislative stability above all else, or should other values, such as broader representation of opinion and more equitable treatment of votes, take priority? If Paul Martin's concern for the "democratic deficit" is anything more than a marketing tool, then he and his government will at the very least allow Canadian voters the opportunity to really debate these fundamental questions, without the process being stage-managed by an army of spin doctors and political consultants.