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Participation in elections on the part of citizens is both a right and a duty. Modern democracies need and invite citizen interest in the political process. Public engagement in the political realm is a necessary antidote to tyranny and corruption. However, the political process can be complex, intimidating and subject to manipulation by political parties and players.

Following the most recent Canadian federal election some journalists and political observers noted the relative lack of voter interest, judging from the continued erosion of the number and percentage of participating voters. In addition, many of the smaller parties complained that the system is stacked against them and is not truly democratic in practice. How can the system be rendered more responsive to contemporary political needs and modern realities? One such "reform" proposal is the introduction of proportional representation.

This supplement is devoted to exploring the meaning of the term, its potential as a reform instrument, and the dangers that it presents to our traditional parliamentary system.

The Background

Representative government has evolved over the centuries gradually involving more people in the process by allowing them to organize into political parties to effect changes in law and put into effect their party policies. Britain and her former colony, Canada, have come to enjoy the same basic method of choosing members of parliament by holding elections on the same day in individual ridings or geographic constituencies. The candidate who receives the largest number of votes in his or her riding becomes the member of Parliament for that riding. There could be five candidates in each riding and the winning candidate could end up with fewer than an absolute majority of the votes cast. This current practice is often referred to as "the first past the post" or "winner-take-all" approach. Critics point out that this system is not democratic and not fair. But what would be better? Some suggest that the worst aspects of this "inequitable" system of voting could be eliminated by adopting some form of proportional representation (PR).

Many nations already employ a form of PR and it is worthwhile to take a closer look at this system to see whether it would help eliminate Canada's "democratic deficit". Many questions immediately come to mind:

Questions

1. What drives the PR express? Fairness? Frustration? Voter justice?
2. Is PR a panacea for what ails Canadian democracy? Is it a method of making all votes count? Does it empower people?
3. Is it a pragmatic method for renewing general interest in the political process? Would it guarantee diversity of gender/ethnic/regional representation and respect for different views? Is it a way of protecting minority rights? Does PR ensure that everyone's views are expressed and respected?
4. How would PR affect minority parties? How would it affect groups with a special focus or concern like pro-life, environmentalism, globalization, anti-weaponization of space, flat-tax promoters? Would it help the special cause by permitting a specific party (devoted to pro-life principles) to gain seats in parliament or would it spell the death-knell for "narrowly" focused movements?
5. Does PR lead to political paralysis or does it break log-jams? Does it offer a sure recipe for compromise or does it give minority, special interest parties undue influence over the government?
6. Is it a way for Canadians to overcome elements of separatism and regional alienation? In the strictly Canadian context would it guarantee a Liberal presence in the West and a Conservative presence in Quebec?
7. Does PR reduce the necessity of big, expensive campaigns or does it exacerbate the problem of campaign financing? (Currently with the new election expenses act, political parties get \$1.75 per vote attained in the election once they reach the 2% basic threshold). Should any public tax money be going to any political party?
8. Does the constituent lose any influence in the selection of the local candidate when a "party selected list" is the basis of the party's assignation of winning candidates? Is there any control left to the local people to impact the nomination of party nominees? Does the system further concentrate power in un-elected, unaccountable party leaders?
9. Who decides on what the platform of the party is to be? What, if any, input does the general citizenry have in the process at the local level?
10. Would it be an effective and proper way to get more women representatives in Parliament? Should this consideration be a concern in trying to make the system more democratic?

<http://www.debatabase.org/details.asp?topicID=48>

Proportional Representation: An Overview

Alastair Endersby

In many countries proportional representation (PR) is used in elections, meaning that the percentage a political party gets of the popular vote becomes the percentage of the seats that party receives in parliament. Who is actually elected to sit in that parliament is usually decided by means of party lists, where the party lists its candidates in order. If it wins 34 seats in parliament, the first 34 candidates on its list are elected as members of that parliament. Countries, such as the UK, Canada, USA and Australia, do not operate PR in elections but use a constituency system instead. Under this system each constituency (a defined geographical area) elects its own representative(s) from among a group of rival candidates competing only for that constituency. It is possible under this system for the relative strengths of the parties in parliament to differ very widely from their share of the overall popular vote; for example, a party with 30% support

in every constituency may well end up with fewer seats than parties with lesser shares of the overall vote, if their supporters are concentrated in particular constituencies. In Canada and USA constituency elections are organized on a “first past the post basis”, where each elector votes only once and the candidate with the highest number of votes is elected to represent that constituency; in an area where more than two parties attract significant support this usually means the winner has little more than 40% of the popular vote. In Australia the alternative vote system is used, where voters list candidates in order of preference; candidates with the fewest votes are progressively eliminated from the count and their ballots are individually transferred to the voter’s next preference until one candidate receives over 50% support and is duly elected.

(This next section is primarily from the work of Endersby but includes additional arguments pro and con from a Canadian viewpoint. The claims and counter-claims are open to debate.)

Pros	Cons
<p>Proportional Representation is fairer. First past the post often results in a party without majority support being able to dominate parliament, as happened in Canada in 2004. Minority parties, e.g. Greens, which win 6% or so of the vote all over the country can fail to win a single seat. PR means that every vote will count therefore more people will vote because everyone is being represented. In addition, there is greater representation of women and minority racial groups in political office. It also gives a boost to smaller parties.</p>	<p>PR leads to weaker government. Typically no one party gains a majority of the popular vote, so coalition governments have to be formed often between two or more parties. This tends to produce unstable governments and frequent elections. Governments are unable to put a clear, positive legislative agenda in place over several years or act decisively in time of crisis. PR results in a political Tower of Babel with fragmented ridings and all sorts of little parties unnecessarily entering into the political equation. Perpetual minority parties like the Libertarian Party, Canada Action Party, the Green Party, and the New Democrats. hope PR will give them the balance of power between the two major parties, as indeed it often does in countries which use PR. This would give undue power to groups that do not enjoy significant support among the masses of voters, but do have a limited appeal among a sector of voters. The defenders of the traditional system contend that voters are better served by focusing on the realistic policy options articulated by the major parties.</p>
<p>Coalition government is a good thing. All social interaction is characterised by cooperation and compromise, and politics should be no exception. Governments which are forced to acknowledge a wide range of public opinion are less likely to introduce policies which victimise minorities or ride roughshod over public opinion for ideological reasons. Empirically, countries with PR systems, such as Germany, show that great prosperity can result from the policies of such governments.</p>	<p>Coalition government is actually unfair, as small parties with only a few percent of support nationally can hold the balance of power, forcing through unpopular or sectarian policies with no national mandate as a price for their support in parliament e.g. Israeli coalition building in the 1990s, or Italy in the 1970’s and 1980’s. Greater competition by electing more candidates from various splinter parties would sacrifice some of the “stability” that Canada, Britain and the United States enjoy under the two-party monopoly.</p>
<p>PR results in more engagement in politics as every vote counts. In a constituency system many seats are dominated by one party and many people see no point in voting as their ballot will make no significant differ-</p>	<p>PR results in less engagement in politics as voters do not get what they voted for – instead post-election deals between the parties create coalitions which do not feel bound by election platform promises. In practice</p>

ence to the local or national result. PR leads to a better informed electorate. Studies show that PR results in higher voter turnout, as well as a more politically astute electorate. When asked a series of questions about politics in their country, people living in PR countries are more likely to know the correct answers than their counterparts in countries with first past the post voting systems, like Canada and the United States.

PR would result in more respect for parliament, with every citizen feeling that their vote had counted and that their national assembly truly reflected the nation. PR would attract top-notch candidates for political office, the kind of experts who are reluctant to engage in the rougher aspects of political contests. Each party could field a sort of “dream team” reflecting ethnic, gender, regional, economic, cultural considerations as well as professional expertise and competence. Under proportional representation there is a much wider selection of parties and views. Canada is so diverse that there is no way that two major political parties can represent the diversity of opinion that exists in Canada. Under PR the size of the vote would determine the size of the representation, but every group would be represented. Adopting PR would finally allow for free and fair competition between all political parties.

accountability is blurred and voters feel alienated from the political process. In addition, many PR systems are very complex and off-putting for voters because the ballots themselves can be quite cumbersome. One of the arguments made against preference voting is that we already over-tax the voters by asking them to fill a plethora of public offices. Why ask the voters to “rank” several candidates for each office”?

PR would result in less respect for parliament as it means the loss of the constituency link, whereby every citizen feels that they have a personal representative in parliament. Much of the work of an MP is constituency business, resolving problems encountered by constituents and raising the particular concerns of their geographical area with the government. A PR system would either abolish or weaken this link. PR would eliminate an important element of direct party member and voter influence over the choice of candidates. Indeed, there would not be “local” candidates. Ordinary people might not have the same opportunity to seek nominations. Party discipline would come first. There would be much less probability for the airing of independent views that run counter to a party’s official platform and declared policies, especially in matters of conscience. The party apparatus does not want them to have that flexibility. PR would prevent freedom of expression. Finally, PR is redundant if the two main parties embody the key ideas that divide the electorate. There is every reason for the two main parties to embrace the most important issues of the day and to develop policies with respect to them. The fact is that virtually only two parties have governed Canada since Confederation.

Questions

1. Which of the perceived strengths of PR are most important to you?
2. Which of the arguments in favour of PR are most persuasive?
3. Which arguments against PR make most sense to you and why?
4. Would PR eventually deteriorate into rule by a professional elite all sharing the same “party outlook”?
5. Is political stability more of a probable outcome under PR or under our present system?

view emphasizes the integrating purpose of elections. According to this view elections are conducted for the exchange of opinions and the results should reflect the complete range of opinions that were expressed.

b) “The goal of an election is to give one group the power to rule, give them a clear mandate to resolve necessary choices.” We could call that the dominance purpose of an election. According to this view the election is held in order to resolve the claims of two or more competing views of the nation or of the world itself. People are asked to make a choice between competing policies and platforms.

Compromises must be made at some level. Even one-party government enacts compromise policies, although the process may be secretive. Some people hold that political decisions are better when many minds work together, when the options are debated in public from many points of view, and when power is fairly distributed....

The historic trend has been toward inclusive democracy. The Magna Carta gave England’s nobles the right to advise their king. Later, all men who owned land won the right to vote for representation in parliament. In the United States, for example, land was cheap and all white

http://accuratedemocracy.com/d_quotes.htm

Two Views on the Purpose of Elections

Different views regarding the purpose of elections may produce different solutions as to the preferred methods for voters to elect representatives.

a) “An election should give representation to the range of opinions in the electorate. Give them a forum to debate and refine policies for the common good.” This

men had the right to vote; the 15th Amendment extended that right to men of colour in 1870, and the 19th Amendment gave suffrage to women in 1920. Now all stable democracies recognize the minority citizen's right to vote. But a few fail to recognize the minority voter's right to representation as reflected in antiquated voting rules.

Questions

1. Which view of elections makes more sense to you and why?
2. How does statement a) support the case for PR?
3. How does statement b) support the present system in operation?
4. Is PR a natural next step in the historical evolution of democracy?

Campaign Ads

Supporters of PR claim that PR limits the anti-democratic effects of unequal campaign funds. In riding or at-large plurality elections, one party can win each seat if they catch the interest of the swing voters, and costly TV ads help to attract these voters. PR is supposed to minimize that. No matter how much money a party spends, it can't win all the votes and all the PR seats. So PR candidates might feel less pressure to raise campaign funds and to serve the donors.

Some voting rules such as run-off elections or preferential ballots make candidates seek second as well as first choice votes — which probably increases the backlash from negative ads because voters committed to the target of the negative ads will decide not to give a high rank to the thrower of the negative mud.

Questions

1. How would PR affect the amount and type of campaign spending?
2. Does the evidence in various countries support these claims?

THE PR BALLOT

One feature worthy of note is the look of the PR ballot. Some claim that it would make the whole process unnecessarily cumbersome, thus tending to scare off the less committed voter. For examples of **PARTY LIST BALLOTS** and **MIXED LIST BALLOT** go to the following websites.

http://www.artpolitic.org/infopedia/co/Condorcet's_method.html

http://www.phatnav.com/wiki/wiki.phtml?title=Condorcet's_method&printable=yes

http://accuratedemocracy.com/voting_rules.htm

PL BALLOTS Closed-list asks voters to mark their ballots for one party. Open-list PR asks voters to mark their ballots for one candidate; that vote counts for both her position on her party's list and for her party's percentage of the votes and seats. These ballots are like ballots for the single-winner plurality rule in that each voter makes one mark on his ballot

On a **MIXED LIST** ballot a voter marks his ballot for one party and also for one district representative. There are two contests on the ballot and it looks much like a ballot for two contests under single-winner plurality.

Questions

1. How would PR complicate the election results with the double vote system?
2. On the other hand, does the double vote constitute a more refined system of voting, if so, how?
3. One may reasonably ask, how does one vote for a candidate of one party and then for another party? What would be the point?

How Does PR Work?

In its simplest format if a party receives 40% of the popular vote, that party receives approximately 40% of the seats (not 50% or 60%). If another party wins 20% of the vote, that party gains 20% of the seats (not 10% or 0%). In other words, the parties' representation reflects their support at the ballot box as per the popular vote received.

Some nations are divided into large electoral "districts" or ridings that have more than one representative elected. For example, Ireland uses districts typically with just 3 to 5 representatives. In Belgium, districts vary in size from 5 to 48 representatives. The Netherlands treats the entire nation as one big district with 150 MPs. In Canada on the other hand there are 308 individual ridings, allocated to the various provinces and territories based on population but with certain threshold guarantees (75 seats) made to Quebec.

Under PR when elections are held, each party publishes a list of candidates. Based on the percentage of votes received by a party in a particular region, a certain percentage of candidates from each party's list win seats.

Germany is an example of the mixed system. On election day, the German voter casts two votes. Each vote determines how half the seats are filled. One vote is for a riding MP, who is elected the same way we fill seats in Canada. Whichever riding candidate wins the most votes wins the local seat. The second vote is cast for a party. Based on the percentage of support for each party, the remaining seats in parliament are "topped up" by party list candidates to ensure that the overall composition of Parliament reflects the preferences of all voters. (See the Scottish example following)

Fair Vote Canada, pushing for PR in Canada, believes that fair voting means governments will usually be formed by coalitions of parties, rather than by a single party. With PR, big parties and smaller parties would have to negotiate, compromise and cooperate.

Critics proclaim that in fact PR would produce a proliferation of small parties, further fragmenting a fragile electorate and placing enormous stresses on the political system already complicated by the existence of three levels of government with competing jurisdictions and unequal responsibilities and powers.

Questions

1. Find out about the organization Fair Vote Canada. Who are they? What is their main goal? How are they financed?
2. How does one account for the percentage of votes obtained by a party but intended strictly for a particular candidate, in other words the voter wanted a particular individual to get elected, but was not truly interested in electing his party?
3. How does one make a particular representative accountable under PR?

<http://www.hooverdigest.org/022/rahat.html>

Examples of PR

Israel

To assess the impact of electoral systems on the behaviors of both voters and politicians, consider the distinction between the political consequences of majoritarian versus proportional representation systems.

In majoritarian systems, such as the system used in the United States and Canada to elect legislators, the winner takes all. That is, the candidate with the most votes wins the contested seat and the rivals stay out of the legislature. Voters tend to vote for the candidates of the two large parties, even if the large parties' candidates are not their preferred ones, for voters like their votes to have influence and therefore refrain from "wasting" them on smaller parties' candidates.

Politicians, for their part, tend to prefer to build careers inside the large parties rather than being outsiders (third—or smaller—parties usually fail to win seats). This tendency, in turn, leads politicians and parties to moderate their platforms and to exhibit more moderate behaviour.

In contrast, proportional representation systems do not impose such restrictions. In the highly proportional Israeli electoral system, every party that wins more than 1.5 percent of the national vote wins a seat in the Knesset. This system allows citizens to vote for small parties without the fear of "wasting" their votes. It also enables politicians to build careers within the framework of smaller and less-moderate parties. It is not surprising,

therefore, that Israel has a multiparty system and coalition governments composed of a few parties rather than a one-party majority.

What happened when Israel used both proportional representation (to elect the Knesset) and majoritarian representation (to elect the prime minister)? Some predicted that this would be an optimal solution for the Israeli polity, arguing that although it would enable representation of the various relevant societal groups in the Knesset to be maintained, it would also increase the ability of the directly elected prime minister to govern. Former coalition governments, they claimed, were subject to the pressures of small sectarian coalition partners. In contrast, a directly elected prime minister, although still dependent on the coalition, would have a popular basis of legitimacy that would increase his or her ability to govern. Some reformers claimed that the party of the prime minister would also enjoy increased support, as voters would want to enhance the powers of their preferred candidate for prime minister by casting votes for his or her party. Thus, they claimed, he or she would have a wider party base for a governing coalition.

The results of the 1996 and (especially) the 1999 elections, however, led to much different consequences. Separating the vote for prime minister from the vote for the legislature led to greater voting for small sectarian parties and decreased representation for the large aggregative parties: Labor and Likud.

How Much Representation Is Too Much?

Before 1996, social cleavages in Israel were represented through parties and by parties. The large aggregative parties successfully incorporated some sectarian voters, giving consideration to their demands and allocating seats for their representatives. For example, many Israeli Arabs voted for Labor and many religious Jews voted for Likud. Social cleavages were partly represented through the large parties, the way many American minority groups are represented through the Democratic Party or certain religious concerns via the Republican Party. Unlike the United States, however, some social cleavages in Israel were represented by parties—for example, by religious, Arab, or Sephardi parties. After 1996, Knesset representation of the small sectarian parties increased while that of the two large parties, which put forth candidates for the prime ministerial elections, decreased. Social cleavages became increasingly represented by parties rather than through them.

It is not clear that all of those voters who switched from the large parties to the small sectarian parties will decide once again to cast their single vote for the large parties. One may argue that this will take away from the citizens a democratic right given to them in 1996: the ability to express their complex policy preferences more definitively. Yet the counterargument—that citizens gained nothing from splitting their vote, as the outputs of the torn and overburdened polity did not better serve

their interests, and that they are better off making the decision between large aggregative parties and small sectarian ones on their own—is strong.

Questions

1. Briefly describe the Israeli system of proportional representation and assess its relative merits, paying particular attention to the political consequences for that nation.
2. What experiment was tried in Israel that combined the majoritarian and proportional systems?
3. What is meant by the phrase "social cleavages in Israel were represented through parties and by parties"?
4. How would this phrase apply to the Canadian situation?

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/events/scotland_99/news/326634.stm

The Scottish Example of Tactical Voting.

The PR system presents serious problems even with the second or preferential vote being cast by electors. A study of the Scottish system reveals how easily one party can manipulate the voting to extract a result more favorable to them. By a system of tactical voting a party could gain many more seats than its supposed proportion of the vote would normally allow. See the Scottish scenario analyzed by Dr. Michael Dyer. When one introduces yet another "refinement" to the political process concerning elections - the Additional Member system - as well as the traditional first past the post, it opens up the potential for abuse and manipulation of that system. Voters and parties can engage in tactical behaviour to take advantage of the system. According to Dr. Dyer if a party has little interest in gaining Additional Members (reserved for second party preferences) they and/or their voters might adopt tactics to manipulate the system to their greater benefit.

Scotland presents an ideal opportunity for Labour to exploit the more nefarious aspects of this procedure. On the basis of the 1997 General Election result and recent opinion polls, Labour would win only seven of the Additional Members, at a cost of more than 180,000 votes each.

Because those expensively-purchased Additional Members, added to the 56 constituency MPs, fail to give Labour an overall majority, the question arises as to whether Labour might not more profitably use its second votes by throwing them to an "alter ego" or other party.

Labour might have decided not to contest the list seats

at all, but instead sponsored a surrogate party, let's call it the (fictitious) Scottish Proper Labour Party (SPLP).

On the basis of the 1997 voting pattern, the SPLP, not having fought any constituencies, would have taken 35 of the Additional Member places, if all Labour voters had transferred their second votes to this party. The combined parties, therefore, would have held 91 of the 129 seats in the parliament. Alternatively, had Labour an electoral pact with the Liberal Democrats, and all the Labour voters had obeyed their leaders, the Liberal Democrats would have taken 37 of the Additional Member seats. Consequently, Labour and the Liberal Democrats would have a combined total of 105 Scottish MPs, leaving the SNP and Conservatives with only a fifth of the representation with two-fifths of the votes.

Questions

1. In this scenario is proportional representation an "improvement" on the perceived unfairness of existing Canadian voting practices?

The Canadian Experience

According to the voting results in Canadian elections between 1935 and 2004, only on four occasions were there "true majorities" won by the party that formed the government. These were 1940, 1949, 1958, and 1984. All the other elections produced "phony majorities".

In the 2004 election if seats had been awarded to parties on the basis of the percentage of votes they received, the Liberals, Bloc and Conservatives would have had fewer seats and the NDP and Green Party more seats.

Rather than 135 seats, the Liberals would have received about 113. Rather than 99 seats, the Conservatives would have about 91. Rather than 54 seats, the Bloc would have about 38. The NDP, rather than 19 seats would have about 48. The Greens, rather than no seats, would have about 13 seats.

The election results also demonstrated that voters and their votes are not treated equally. The Bloc gained one seat for about every 31,000 votes cast for their party; the Liberals gained one seat for every 37,000 votes, the Conservatives one seat for every 40,000 votes. Meanwhile, the NDP gained only one for every 111,000 votes. The Greens attracted more than 500,000 votes but gained no seats at all – compared to the Liberals who attracted less than 500,000 votes in Atlantic Canada alone, where they won 22 seats.

Critics of our current voting system claim that it gives too much power to regional parties and too little to smaller, national parties. Parties that concentrate their resources and support regionally have a better chance at winning seats, while those that appeal to voters nationally may capture a significant share of support in any/or

all provinces, but win no seats.

In other words, votes which are not translated into parliamentary seats are discounted. As a result, those who voted for a winning candidate are represented in Parliament, while everyone else gets no representation.

In the six federal elections between 1980 and 2000, just over 49% of the votes were “wasted”. Those voters cast votes, but elected no one. On average, more than 6.2 million Canadians cast “wasted” votes in each of these federal elections.

Questions

1. What is meant by “true majorities” and “phony majorities”?
2. Did the “phony majorities” provide “good government”?
3. How would the results change dramatically if the PR system were applied to the last two Canadian federal elections?
4. What does the PR promoter mean by a “wasted” vote? Are any votes ever “wasted”?
5. Would you feel that your vote was “wasted” if the person you voted for was not elected?
6. Conduct a debate on the relative merits of PR versus the traditional “first past the post” system.

The Clear Danger of Proportional Representation to Grassroots Influence in the Political Process

The reality is that in the absence of direct democracy whereby each citizen has a definite and clear role to play in the total decision-making process, representative or indirect democracy is the best and most practicable form of government. Why?

A PR system would only encourage the “balkanization” of Canadian politics. It would work to fragment Canadians into more warring political factions. Besides, Canada already has a multi-party system. Voters have lots of choices at the polls. They are free to choose federal and provincial parliaments that represent the diversity of political interests and ideologies in this country.

PR would allow candidates to be elected by appealing only to a narrow segment of the population, while our current system forces candidates to appeal to a broad majority of voters. The winner-take-all system is also seen as bringing people together in large umbrella parties. Does Canada benefit from having a Quebec or Alberta or Ontario party that would focus attention on racial, ethnic, cultural, regional differences, thus deepening these divisions. Is Canada better served by a proliferation of one or two issues parties?

There is political factionalism in Canada. What is the best way to deal with this difficult situation? Which vot-

ing system will be most effective in managing these conflicts by encouraging dialogue, negotiation, and coalition-building between these factions? Is PR really needed when minority groups are already empowered through their participation in the mainstream political parties and when they enjoy influence through the party nomination process? Why give up this power and influence in exchange for a “party list” of candidates that is not subject to the same degree of control by the local party members?

A “moderate” party is likely to attract the support of large segments of the electorate sufficient to enjoy genuine support for their right to govern on behalf of all society. It is claimed that if everyone is represented, there is a better chance that all groups will be treated fairly and of course citizens are more likely to respect the decisions of political bodies that are truly representative. PR is not needed in Canada because there is no risk of excluded groups becoming so frustrated with conventional politics that they end up resorting to undesirable and violent political tactics like riots, bombings, or armed resistance. Given the temper of political debate in Canada there is wide acceptance and tolerance of diverse points of view within the political system. Admittedly, there is not as much tolerance as one would wish on the discussion of some issues (abortion) and too much on other issues (same-sex marriage).

The “big-tent” parties are coalitions of various tendencies and factions and when one of them forms a majority government there has already been an internal compromise on the big issues. During the election those issues were included in the platform that they promised to enact if elected. However in minority governments situations the electorate never knows what deals will be made in private chambers after the seat count has been determined. An electoral system that tends to produce majorities gives voters a clear choice of government policies; systems that tend to produce minorities do not.

One can make the case that the “first past the post” system of electing parliamentarians offers more scope for changes in government. Take this scenario into account. In Canada, if we had PR federally, the Liberals would never get less than 30% of the seats, and Quebec nationalists would always have about 15% sewn up. With the left-wing NDP garnering another 18% the Conservatives would never form a government, even in a coalition. Is it fair having a permanently left-of-centre government?

A serious concern about PR is that it would allow extremists to win office. Does Canada need formal representation in Parliament of the Marijuana Party, Rhinoceros Party, Free the Whales Party, Save the Trees Party, the Communist Party, the White Supremacy Party, etc.?

The real task of legislative bodies is to make policy decisions for the good of society, not just to make sure that every idea held by somebody gets an equal airing.

Legislatures are also deliberative institutions: bodies that use debate to seek the truth and educate the public. That important deliberative function is promoted more effectively in our representation system when elected members of parliament are free to voice their personal views and to truly represent the views of their constituents.

It is incumbent on the electorate to demand real freedom of expression for their M.P.s. A reform along these lines would probably go further than most other efforts to ensure that Parliament reflected the wishes of the populace. Free and independent votes in parliament should be guaranteed to M.P.'s when it comes to serious social issues like abortion and protecting the traditional definition of marriage against abuse by too liberal party hierarchies or through the manipulation of the social agenda by an un-elected judges and human rights commissions.

Difficulties in Making Proportional Representation Accountable

One of the major drawbacks to PR has to be the lack of accountability of M.P.s to their local constituents and conversely the lack of direct power on the part of the grassroots to influence the nomination and electoral processes.

Presently, when one joins a political party one has certain privileges, chief among them being that of participating in a nomination process for selection of a candidate to represent the party in a specific riding at election time. Furthermore the party member has the opportunity to help choose a party leader and the opportunity to give input into the party platform through policy conventions.

Under PR what would motivate an ordinary person to become involved in politics by joining a political party? Why become embroiled in a process in which one could not play a meaningful role?

Traditionally, candidates seeking the nomination of a party encourage friends and others to sign up with the local party association. The candidates wage a mini campaign to convince the majority of party members in a riding that they would make the best candidate to represent the party, win the riding and thus help to form a national government. The candidates vying for the party nomination have to present their credentials, their experiences, their personal qualities, competencies, and electoral appeal. They subject themselves to the scrutiny of their peers. They have to gain the confidence of hundreds and sometimes thousands of people at the grassroots first before running in a general election. Approval from the party apparatus is important but should be secondary to the will of the members. After all if a person were applying for a job shouldn't his bosses (in this case, the electorate) have an opportunity to vet his preparedness? In PR this vetting process does not take place by the electorate but rather by party apparatchiks. Under PR the Party List is created by a small group of people who decide who is to go forward to represent the party. How

is this democratic?

PR would constitute a radical change to our political system, and not for the better. A national slate of candidates having no direct connection to individual ridings or groups of voters is almost a perversion of democracy. The national slate of candidates would not be accountable to anyone except the party hierarchy and the "nation" at large. It is tantamount to abdicating responsibility and letting an anonymous group of bureaucrats and pre-selected elites rule. The individual voter would no longer have an M.P. whom he actually knew, or could call with a problem, or who understood the specific problems of a community. Would there be a need or genuine function for a constituency office with a PR system of Party Lists?

Worse still is the case of an individual voter who wants to vote according to their conscience on some important issue. That voter wants the M.P. to likewise take into account these moral concerns. The voter, let's say, is pro-life. She wants to vote for a particular candidate whose party supports a policy of unrestricted abortion. The PL candidate sympathizes but quips that he cannot go against the party. So what choice does this voter really have?

There is great concern that potential candidates cannot easily get onto the party lists. How do candidates get themselves on Party Lists? Whom do they have to please? party leader? party president?

Proportional representation is dangerous because it would constitute a radical change to our system of choosing a government. It strikes at the very heart of democracy, the right of the people to freely participate in the political process at the most basic level. Citizens would lose their right to choose candidates for political office based on personal knowledge and support. For supporters of important over-arching causes like pro-life it would eliminate their capacity to influence that political process at its most sensitive stage – at the grassroots – where all great movements have their source and strength. Ironically, PR would abort political views that the powerful consider too troubling and problematic.

Has PR actually worked to bring about social peace and harmony where it has been introduced? Strangely, those nations that have adopted proportional representation make up the vanguard for promoting the most socially permissive and morally bankrupt legislation on the planet, harmful to family and to society in the long run.

On balance, PR does not truly provide remedies for the perceived problems of modern democracy judging from the results in those nations that have adopted one or other of the PR approaches.

Questions

1. In what important ways is the "first past the post" system superior to PR?
2. What is meant by the "big tent" parties?

3. Which parties in Canada might be very reluctant to embrace PR?
4. According to some observers PR would be a “radical” change to our political system. How drastic would it be? Is that kind of change necessary?
5. Defenders of the traditional system cite PR as being dangerous. Why do they conclude that? Are they justified regarding their concerns? Why or why not?
6. Offer a critique of PR based on its perceived denial of the individual voter’s ability to influence elections at the grassroots. Is this a legitimate drawback?

<http://www.dvmen.org/dv-45.htm>

Pro-lifers Would be Denied Opportunity

It is harder to be pro-life in some parties than in others. But there are many constituencies where pro-life supporters can wield clout. It’s probably a mistake to put all pro-life eggs in one party’s rickety basket. The opponents of pro-life never make that mistake. They always join the dominant party of their area, no matter which it is. It is incumbent on the pro-lifer to join and influence the party of their choice and work for the pro-life cause within that party. PR would put a real crimp on the ability of pro-lifer supporters to work at the grassroots, joining and being active in the party of their choice whether it be at a university level, local riding association, nomination meetings, party leadership campaign, or general election.

Working within the present system brings modest gains, and it does encourage activism. Pro-life supporters should be shrewd in getting elected or appointed to positions in riding associations and working from within. They have to help create a welcoming environment for pro-life issues. They should volunteer to serve on committees and to work during election campaigns.

What are the benefits of actively participating at the local riding association level? The media makes pro-lifers look like kooks. Look at the recent federal election and the media’s tactics in reporting on Bob Merrifield, Randy White and Cheryl Gallant. No wonder “conservative” politicians have problems. However, the pro-lifer serving on a riding executive or committee can reach people who would never come to their church, social club, or home. This would help to counter the harm done by the media.

Riding executives call or letter is going to get a lot of attention from elected officials of their own party.

Running or serving on a riding association is a good place to start learning how to build winning coalitions. One needs to gain experience in order to run successfully against experienced, entrenched pro-abortionists.

Riding associations influence or control most party matters. If a national party dumps or refuses to adopt a

pro-life position in their party platform, it won’t be because of election results. It will be due to a handful of secular pro-abortionists who have patiently wormed their way to high party positions, starting in riding associations.

Questions ?

1. How can the ordinary citizen influence the political process at the local level?
2. What factors work against people becoming involved actively in the political process?

Better solutions to the Democratic Deficit?

Rather than tinkering with our system of representation in a radical fashion that might undermine many of our traditions, why not consider these ideas or proposals

1. Introduce an Australian type of run-off election for those ridings where the winning candidate failed to win at least 50% of the votes cast in the riding. The benefits of this practice is that at least it would ensure that each riding had an elected representative who earned the preferential approval of a majority of the voters. This would also permit voters to vote a second time in light of what change they want to see. It might eliminate more of the negative campaigning that occurs now.
2. Make voting a compulsory duty. This may not ensure a majority win by the winning candidate in a riding, but it would ensure a vaster level of participation on the part of the citizenry. If a citizen enjoys the benefits of good government, then they ought to take at least one active step - vote in all elections - federal, provincial, and municipal.
3. Restrict the amount of money for election campaigns. Restricting the amount of money that can be spent on a campaign by individual candidates and by the political parties would level the playing field on the part of all parties and candidates. This would permit the rise of new parties and would at least not discourage people of modest means from presenting themselves for election.
4. Use modern electronic technology to encourage people to learn about candidates and party policies and to vote electronically. This would make it easier to vote and the number of people actually voting should increase.

Our system of government has allowed for the organic evolution of government and society. It has helped to produced stability, continuity, productivity and a high standard of living. It has served the needs of Canada very well, if not perfectly. The answer is not to make things brand new or even substantially different, but rather to make the current system work better, more transparently, and to make people participate more in the whole process.

Questions ?

1. Do any of these proposals offer real improvement? How? Why?
2. Is the advice of “letting sleeping dogs lie” the best advice when it comes to the Canadian political system after all?

http://accuratedemocracy.com/voting_rules.htm

The following sites discuss the issue within a Canadian context.

<http://www.fairvotecanada.org/fvc/AboutFairVoting/16>

<http://www.fairvotecanada.org/fvc/AboutFairVoting/17>

http://dominionpaper.ca/features/2003/08/08/one_citize.html

http://www.caw.ca/whoweare/CAWpoliciesandstatements/discussionpapers/proportional_index.asp

<http://www.fairvotecanada.org/fvc.php/>

<http://www.fairvotecanada.org/updir/DubiousDemocracyReport-june04.pdf>

http://www.accuratedemocracy.com/d_quotes.htm

<http://www.andrewcoyne.com/>

<http://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/articles/article297.html>

http://www.misterc.ca/proportional_representation.htm

<http://www.ed.labonte.com/pr.html>

<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/polit/damy/prlib.htm>

<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/polit/damy/BeginnningReading/whatispr.htm>

