

THE CASE FOR A NEW AND BETTER VOTING SYSTEM: "VOTE123" (V123)

What's wrong with this very familiar picture?

- In the U.S. presidential election 2000, Al Gore led George W. Bush by more than 500,000 votes.
- Ralph Nader got almost 2,900,000 votes.
- Exit polls showed that most of the Nader voters preferred Gore as second choice.
- Nader raised important issues that Gore and Bush chose to ignore, and fairly presented himself as the only real opposition to the "Republicrat duopoly" [i.e. the symbiotic power-sharing relationship between the Republicans and Democrats that effectively excludes potential contenders].
- Bush was selected as winner by the Supreme Court, through a blatantly partisan decision.
- Nader is widely accused of 'costing' Gore the election.
- At the end of his first term, Bush has set almost every possible negative record for an American president. Yet, based almost entirely on negative campaigning, he seems poised to perhaps even win the 2004 election, in an intramural Republicrat contest that might be characterized as a taste test between "Skull & Bones Classic" and "Skull & Bones Light".
- Nader is again the only candidate raising important issues ignored by the Republicrats.
- But Nader is abandoned by most of his supporters, rebuked by the pundits, and reviled by partisan Democrats for endangering the democratic health of the nation by running in this election. His campaign is also reputed to be covertly supported by Republicans.
- Nader responds that participation in the democratic process is a fundamental right of every citizen, and that American voters sorely need more and better alternatives than the two Republicrat candidates—whose campaigns are overwhelmingly negative and largely avoid serious discussion of the most important issues.

This summarizes what is probably the most well known failure of a nominally democratic system. Some questions immediately arise:

- Why does almost everyone jump to the conclusion that the solution to a problem of democratic dysfunction should be less democratic choice?
- Why does almost everyone blame the brave candidate rather than the bad voting system?
- How many people who voted for Gore would have actually preferred Nader, but didn't want to waste their vote or help to elect Bush?
- Why can't people vote for who they really prefer, and the voting system process their selections in a reasonable way that truly reflects the will of the people?
- Why can't the people have a voting system that facilitates rather than excludes the participation of more candidates with different ideas, without this risking the election of a candidate with lower overall voter acceptance?
- How might the people vote if they had an electoral system that was open to fair competition with new parties, and if they could indicate their preferences between several candidates rather than being coerced by the system into voting for the "lesser of evils" in the hope of defeating some other candidate?

In any contest, the rules of the game largely determine how it is played. Rules specify how a game is scored. Rules also shape player strategies and behaviours. The rules may encourage

'fair play' if such behaviour is rewarded. Alternatively, 'foul play' may become common practice if such behaviour is not sufficiently penalized and proves to be a winning strategy.

Democracy, as it is contested in electoral politics, is in these respects just another game. Of course it is the most important game by far, with vastly higher stakes than any other game. At the highest levels, it is played as a game of hardball. It is a team sport which the major contestants play only to win, and they will do whatever it takes to win.

Democracy as it is played today is certainly not a clean game. Indeed most people would not want to be involved in electoral politics—despite the potential fame and fortune it may provide. And under the increasingly professionalized command structure of party strategists, spin-doctors and pollsters etc., the game of politics only seems to be getting more unethical and dishonest. Increasing public apathy and disgust with politics and politicians are clear reflections that democracy is becoming more dysfunctional and falling further into disrepute.

However, as blameworthy as the politicians may be, it would be a serious error to think that the players are themselves the main problem. After all, they are just gladiators doing what it takes to survive in an arena of brutal combat. If we the people don't like the way the game of electoral politics is being played, the solution is not to change the players; what must be done is to change the rules, to sufficiently discourage 'foul play' and reward 'fair play'.

The rules of electoral politics may be grouped into a number of categories, all of which bear re-examination. But the voting system is the kernel where the will of the people is translated into elected representatives. While seldom considered, there are many alternative voting systems, each of which would produce its own characteristic set of strategies and behaviours by parties, politicians and voters. The voting parameters might include: whether a voter has only one or several votes; whether a voter may indicate preference among several candidates; whether a voter may participate in the election of only one or several members; or whether the overall results would be in some sense proportional to the total vote.

In order to properly analyze alternative electoral systems, we first need to establish a consensus as to the problems to be resolved and appropriate criteria for a superior system. In the real world, there is of course no perfect electoral system—but some can be fairly determined to be superior or inferior to others, as measured against objective criteria. While this is very simple in principle, it may be a difficult challenge to achieve. But the established criteria would probably be instrumental in determining which alternative is ultimately recommended. So it is important not to rush to the evaluation stage before defining the problems and establishing appropriate criteria. This analysis is to facilitate this process.

Problems with existing electoral system:

1. **Increasing public alienation and apathy.** Increasing levels of public disgust with politics and distrust of politicians, particularly among younger citizens, are directly attributable to the increasing negativity of political campaigns. Political spin-doctors have proven that negative advertising, personality attacks and divisive issues provide a winning formula under a plurality based electoral system where the winner may only need about 25% of eligible votes. Voter participation is declining here and everywhere because it is increasingly seen as a futile and hollow gesture.
2. **Public frustration with voting options.** Under our existing voting system, many people are coerced into voting against their true preference. This produces election results that may be vast distortions of the true will of the people. Three common voting syndromes seriously degrade the quality of our democracy: "strategic voting" for the perceived "lesser of evils"; "vote splitting" between two similar parties; and "wasted votes" for parties with

no chance of winning. The single-X “First-Past-the-Post” (**1X-FPP**) voting system is directly responsible for creating the public mind-lock that produces such anti-democratic practices. These are perpetuated in the self-fulfilling prophecy that only one or two parties have any chance of winning. This situation greatly restricts the level of meaningful policy competition, as the smaller parties with challenging ideas and platforms are effectively excluded. Further, the major parties tend to morph into a political “duopoly” with little differentiation on major policies. They predictably choose to divert political discussion away from the hard issues, on which they generally have no answers and few differences, and engage one another instead in contests of political mud-wrestling focused on personalities, scandals, fears and prejudices, cynically calculated to touch the “hot-buttons” of the core constituencies. Such anti-democratic behaviour by the major parties has become almost standard practice—because the political strategists know that negative campaigning works when only about 25% of eligible votes are needed to win.

3. **Frustration with electoral results**, primarily by losing parties and their supporters. The existing plurality based electoral system invariably distorts results in favour of the winners and to the detriment of the losers. This characteristic commonly results in majority governments for parties with around 40% of the votes from perhaps only 25% of eligible voters. Parties with the potential to form government usually extol the positive features of majority government as their defense of the status quo. Smaller parties and their supporters usually advocate some form of proportional representation. The general public is probably of mixed mind, but not all that concerned about it. Their frustration is probably more based on the experience that changing the parties or the people never seems to accomplish much more than replacing one group that failed to serve the people’s interests with another that will probably not be much better. The problem here is mainly the lack of an effective capacity to hold governments and politicians accountable to the people on specific policies and legislation. General elections fail miserably in this regard, especially given that campaigns are often more about personality and scandal than policy, and given the fact that the electable parties share many of the same policies.

Under this analysis, the following objectives are proposed as criteria for the evaluation of alternative voting systems:

- **Clean up the game of electoral politics.** Adopt a voting system that reduces anti-democratic behaviour by parties and politicians. Raise the bar required for election, and raise the standards of political behaviour by discouraging rather than rewarding negative campaigning and divisive issues. Reward parties for consensus building and broad overall support, rather than merely building the largest partisan faction through cynical use of divisive issues to exploit voters’ fears and prejudices.
- **Liberate voters to express their true will**, through a voting system that effectively resolves the problems of “strategic voting”, “vote splitting” and “wasted votes”. Empower voters with the capacity to provide a more accurate expression of their true preferences than a single-X.
- **Raise the level of political competition**, through a voting system that facilitates rather than inhibits the emergence of new parties with new ideas and policies. Broaden the diversity of political debate and elected representatives.
- Retain the better features of the existing electoral system, especially **regional representation**.
- The question of **party-proportionality** is in fundamental conflict with the issue of **stronger governments**, where there is a strong case for each. Hence, this analysis will consider both options, and leave the selection to others.

The table which follows provides a qualitative comparison of the major voting system alternatives measured against these criteria. It groups the alternatives into two categories, depending on whether the voting procedure involves the voter in the election of either a single or multiple members.

The analyzed voting systems in which each ballot participates in the election of only one member are:

- **“Single-X, First-Past-the-Post” (1X-FPP)**, where the criterion for election is a plurality that commonly falls short of a majority.
- **“Instant Run-off Vote” (IRV)**, also referred to as “Alternative Vote” (**AV**). It is based upon a preferential ballot on which voters specify as many selections as desired in rank order. The criterion for election is a majority, achieved if necessary through an iterative procedure in which the lowest ranked candidates are successively eliminated, with those votes reallocated to each voters’ next choices.
- **“Vote123” (V123)** as advocated by these authors, which is a simplified derivation of the Borda Count. It is also based upon a preferential ballot, but voters specify only three selections in rank order. It assigns differential values to first, second and third-place selections (proposed to be 3, 2 and 1 points respectively), and the criterion for election is highest acceptability to the overall electorate as the candidate with the highest total score.

From the detailed analysis of **V123** and its comparison with alternative voting systems [refer to www.vote123.info], the case is objectively made that: **1X-FPP** is a deeply flawed and totally unacceptable voting system (where there are more than two candidates); that **IRV (AV)** is a major improvement; and **V123** is much simpler and somewhat superior to **IRV**.

The analyzed voting systems in which each ballot may participate in the election of more than one member are:

- **“Mixed Member Proportional” (MMP) in combination with 1X-FPP**. This is what is usually referred to as “proportional representation” (PR); pure PR is effectively a non-starter as it would discard the fundamental principle of regional representation, and the bond of service and accountability between members and a constituency of electors. Further, as most advocates of PR seem more concerned with achieving their desired result than either understanding or resolving the broad array of fundamental problems caused by a single-X ballot, they are apparently willing to prop up the dysfunctional **1X-FPP** which gave rise to the demands for a better alternative. Given that **MMP** typically involves about one-third of members being appointed from party lists while the remaining two-thirds would be elected under **1X-FPP**, this “solution” not surprisingly fails to score well—except in comparison to pure **1X-FPP** or pure PR.
- **V123 in combination with the Kennedy form of PR**—by far the simplest and best form of PR. If it is determined that party-proportionality is a requirement [understanding that **V123** by itself would be an effective remedy to the other problems of **1X-FPP**], then it should only be applied as a corrective upon the best single-member voting system, i.e. **V123**. Further, it should be understood that the best measure of the overall public support for a party is obtained through the total **V123** score for all its candidates [this being a more accurate reflection of the public will than a separate box permitting the selection of only one party]. In addition, the Kennedy PR method of allocating voting power to each elected member as an equal share of the total votes for that party [with accommodation of votes for unelected parties and independent candidates, reference KENNEDY-1362: http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca/public/get_involved/submission/K/KENNEDY-1362] provides an automatic and more accurate realization of party-proportionality than **MMP**, while avoiding the problems of party lists, unaccountable and second-class members.

- **“Single Transferable Vote” (STV) in combination with IRV (AV).** This combination has been proposed by Loenen under the designation “Preferential Plus” [refer to http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca/resources/deliberation/Loenen_Nick_submission_hand_out.pdf]. **STV** is the extension of the **IRV** concept and methodology to enlarged electoral districts from which typically five members would be elected. It produces nearly proportional results and is a highly commendable alternative. But it entails far more radical changes, and much greater complexity in both the ballot and vote counting procedures. While **STV** may be an acceptable solution for urban constituencies, it is recognized that rural electoral districts should not be enlarged, hence would most logically be retained but upgraded to **IRV**.

While the “democracy deficit” undoubtedly involves many factors beyond the voting system, it is equally true that the health of our democracy, the electoral process and the results it produces can be no more satisfactory than the voting system. Hence, while any of the alternatives analyzed are clearly superior to **1X-FPP**, some are objectively superior to others.

In conclusion, the authors feel strongly that:

1. **1X-FPP must be replaced, as it is markedly inferior to all of the other alternatives**, and is a major contributing factor to the widespread and increasing discontent with the way democracy functions today. It incites many kinds of anti-democratic behaviour by parties, politicians and voters alike—which must be rectified by the chosen alternative if it is to improve the quality of democracy and public respect for politics and politicians.
2. **V123 would be the simplest and most effective remedy** for the problems with our current democratic system. It is a clear upgrade to **1X-FPP**—raising the standard for election from mere plurality to highest acceptability to the overall electorate—without changing electoral districts or the bond between elected members and constituents. It retains the feature of strong governments while facilitating the emergence of new parties and policies. It eliminates the problems of “strategic voting” and “vote splitting”, and substantially reduces the problem of “wasted votes”. It does not require a longer ballot or convoluted counting procedure, and has no downside or vulnerability to principled criticism.
3. **V123 in combination with the Kennedy form of PR would be the best solution if party-proportionality is still deemed to be a requirement** after full consideration of the downside issues and the fact that **V123** alone would eliminate virtually all other defects of **1X-FPP**. [As the simplest and best form of **PR**, this is the authors’ first-choice.]
4. **STV with IRV (AV) is a very worthy alternative**, if near proportionality is desired and its radical changes and complexities are not seen to be impediments to its implementation.
5. **The public referendum on voting system reform should allow the people to choose between: (1) voting reform with party-proportionality; (2) voting reform without party-proportionality; (3) no voting reform.** While it could well be argued that the collective wisdom of the BC Citizens’ Assembly might provide better judgment as to the best voting system alternative, the trade-off between the advantages and disadvantages of both party-proportionality and stronger governments is both highly subjective and fundamental to the quality of government. Logically, it might best be seen as a case for a referendum using **V123** to allow voters to express their comparative preferences and determine which alternative had the highest overall public acceptance. But of course a **V123** voting system cannot be utilized unless/until it would be adopted.

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[Refer to detailed analysis of voting systems on website www.vote123.info]

THE ESSENTIALS OF "VOTE123" (V123)

- **V123** uses a preferential ballot, where voters specify their top three choices. **V123** is not yet used in any country, but it is commonly used in voting for various awards.
- **V123** is a simplified derivative of the Borda Count voting method which embodies the principle of "election by order of merit". Votes are totaled as the point values of all first, second and third-place votes.
- The suggested point values of first, second and third-place votes are 3, 2 and 1 points respectively. While other point values might be chosen, the rationale for these point values is that two ballots that reversed the order of three candidates would offset one another, with all three candidates receiving the same total of 4 points each [i.e. two second-place votes deemed to have equal value as a first plus a third-place vote].
- The powers of **V123** reside in its capacity to change the behaviours of parties, politicians and voters:
 - To win, parties and politicians would be obliged to maximize their second or third-place support from voters who favour other parties and candidates. This would substantially raise the bar for election, and predictably should raise the standards of campaign strategies. Because it would no longer be possible to be elected with the support of only 25% of eligible voters, negative campaigning and divisive issues that are so widely exploited today under **1X-FPP** would become losing strategies under **V123**, because they alienated the supporters of other parties.
 - Voters would be freed from the "strategic voting" syndrome. They can vote for their preferred party or candidate, and still cast a vote for the "lesser of two evils" which may be the leading contenders.
 - Voters and parties would be freed from the "vote splitting" syndrome. Parties with similar platform appealing mostly to the same voter constituency would presumably be ranked first and second by the supporters of each. The stronger of the two would win, and would not be defeated by another party that under **1X-FPP** might be the winner due to vote splitting. [This would have made the merger of the PC and Alliance parties unnecessary. And since the new Conservative party in the recent federal election could not retain the combined vote that the original two parties had, its results fell short of what might have occurred under **V123**—which might well have produced a PC-Alliance coalition government.]
 - The "wasted vote" syndrome would no longer be a serious impediment confronting small parties and their supporters. Most voters would probably select the winning candidate as one of their three choices.
 - Small parties would have vastly more opportunity to gain votes, and the better among them would soon be seen as viable parties rather than fringe parties. This should inject many new ideas and serious political competition that should be capable of fracturing the mind-lock that sustains the political duopoly under the enormous constraints of **1X-FPP**. This would also force the major parties to deal with substantive issues rather than exploiting wedge issues and personality attacks.
- Environmental interests and other long-range issues should receive much better attention and voter support under **V123**. Under **1X-FPP**, the campaign focus is invariably upon the immediate issues of the day. Under **V123**, voters can express themselves on both the short-term and long-term issues.
- **V123** would also provide a superior foundation for the implementation of **PR**. The total party vote under **V123** would be the truest measure of overall public support, and the most accurate basis for party-proportionality. The Kennedy method of **PR** allocates voting power to each elected member as an equal share of the total votes for that party.

Qualitative Comparison of Single-Member Voting Systems

i.e.: each ballot participates in the election of only one member

<u>Criteria for comparison of each voting system:</u>	<u>1X-FPP</u>	<u>V123</u>	<u>IRV (AV)</u>
Cleanup the game of electoral politics	-	best	better
Criterion for election	plurality	highest acceptability	majority
Liberate voters to express their true will	no	yes	yes
“strategic voting”	major problem	eliminated	eliminated
“vote splitting”	major problem	eliminated	count sequence dependent
“wasted votes”	major problem	reduced	reduced
More accurate voter expression than single-X	-	yes	yes
Raise the level of political competition	-	best	better
Facilitates, inhibits or prevents new parties and ideas	prevents	facilitates	inhibits
Regional representation	yes	yes	yes
Party-proportionality or stronger governments	stronger governments	stronger governments	stronger governments
OVERALL COMPARATIVE MERIT	WORST	BEST	GOOD

Qualitative Comparison of Multi-Member Voting Systems

i.e.: each ballot may participate in the election of more than one member

<u>Criteria for comparison of each voting system:</u>	<u>1X-FPP/MMP</u>	<u>V123/PR (Kennedy)</u>	<u>STV/IRV (AV)</u>
Cleanup the game of electoral politics	not much	best	good
Criterion for election	plurality / Party list [NB: 1X-FPP plurality typically 40%]	most acceptable / most acceptable	quota / majority [NB: STV quota typically 20%]
Liberate voters to express their true will	partially	yes	yes
“strategic voting”	persists with 1X-FPP (i.e. most seats)	eliminated	eliminated
“vote splitting”	persists with 1X-FPP (i.e. most seats)	eliminated	count sequence dependent
“wasted votes”	persists with 1X-FPP (i.e. most seats)	eliminated	eliminated
More accurate voter expression than single-X	yes	yes	yes
Raise the level of political competition	no	yes	yes
Facilitates, inhibits or prevents new parties and ideas	facilitates	facilitates	facilitates
Regional representation	yes / no	yes / yes	no / yes
Party-proportionality or stronger governments	Party-proportionality [approximate]	Party-proportionality [accurate]	Party-proportionality [approx.]
OVERALL COMPARATIVE MERIT	GOOD	BEST	VERY GOOD