

Empowering Citizens

Proposal to Change the Existing Electoral System To a Single Transferable Vote System

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In Need of Electoral Reform

Representative democracy as currently practiced in Canada is a blunt instrument of popular decision-making at best and a vanguardist concentration of power at worst. Therefore, we should do everything in our power to change it starting with the way we choose representatives.

The way we choose representatives in a liberal democracy in combination with our political institutions produces particular tendencies that either facilitate debate and dialogue between diverse perspectives or leads to strict ideological partisanship and polarization between viewpoints. Unfortunately it seems that the latter is more the reality.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is twofold. First, to argue for substantive changes to electoral procedure as a necessary and incumbent first step in democratizing our polity. Second, to propose a particular form of proportional representation that is in keeping with our constitutional institutions but more accurately reflects the secular diversity of British Columbia. A caution to the reader this is not intended to be an exhaustive argument but rather a summary one.

A representative democratic governance structure should accomplish the following:

- 1.) Link power to consent
- 2.) Make power accountable
- 3.) Represent all of the patches in the social quilt
- 4.) Facilitate public consultation on social policy

Objectives of an electoral system

The objectives of a valid method of election may be defined as

- 1.) To determine the electors' preferences and, as far as possible, to give them effect;
- 2.) To ensure that as many as possible of those who take part have an effect, and an equal effect, on the result;
- 3.) To ensure that nearly every elector can identify among those elected representatives if their choice whom they have helped elect;
- 4.) To obtain, as far as possible, proportional representation (PR) of whatever views, opinions and judgments motivate electors when they vote;
- 5.) Positive voting that expresses true voter preference;
- 6.) Limited propensity to use tactical voting

Colin Rosenstiel, James Woodward-Nutt 1997

The Problem

Pyramidal hierarchies have a built in tendency to concentrate power at the top. There is an inversely proportional relationship between the concentration of power and accountability. If power cannot be held justifiably accountable it will lead to abuse and corruption. Therefore, we must examine and understand how our current electoral system contributes to the dual problem of

concentration and non-accountability of political power before we can begin to suggest alternatives.

Historical Context

Our current political system the Westminster parliamentary system was the result of a nexus between an emerging nation-state independent of the power of the priesthood headed up by the Pope and the struggle between two powerful interest groups, the landed aristocracy represented by the monarch and the emerging economically dominant, urban based merchant capitalist and professional middle class. The compromise that was worked out in seventeenth century England in the aftermath of two revolutionary wars was a constitutional monarchy in which the monarch appointed a prime minister and cabinet from the party with the most representatives.

Enfranchisement was limited to men with property either in the form of land or capital. These two partisan interests coalesced around two political parties: the Tories representing the aristocracy and the Whigs representing the merchant capitalists. Since there were only two parties running candidates a majority was guaranteed in every electoral district.

By the late 19th century male workers had obtained the right to vote which greatly expanded those eligible to cast ballots in a general election. In addition, workers organized their own political parties, which meant more than two parties regularly contested elections making it more difficult to obtain a majority. It was at this time that majority election rules were changed to plurality rules. Plurality refers to the number of votes that the winning candidate receives minus the first runner-up's total or the margin of victory. This electoral system became known as single member plurality (SMP) because seats were distributed by constituency, one seat for each constituency and plurality because a winning candidate was no longer required to win a majority.

In Canada SMP, or as it is more popularly known, the first past the post (FPTP) system of has been used exclusively at the federal level to select representatives for the House of Commons. However, the same cannot be said provincially, between approximately 1920-60 two Canadian provinces Alberta and Manitoba, used single transferable vote (STV) for some provincial and municipal contests.

Shifting the Balance of Power

Our system of governance is generally referred to as a constitutional monarchy, or more specifically, the Westminster parliamentary model. It is based on the notion of responsible government in which there is no separation of power between the legislative assembly and the executive. It is important to keep in mind that this system of governance is designed to give the executive branch great decision-making power on the belief that strong central leadership is essential to govern a country or province. In fact, this is the reason we call people elected to houses of parliament in Canada members rather than representatives as they do in republican forms of governance. For the simple reason that members' primary allegiance is to the parliament and not their constituents. In theory, the executive is held responsible or in check by being accountable to non-partisan members of the legislative assembly. However, the struggle for enfranchisement by white, working class men led to the formation of mass based political parties along with the need for party discipline. This requirement for party discipline essentially removed the check on executive power by the legislature. For members of the legislature were now

beholden to the party line rather than parliament. Ironically, giving the premier and cabinet; and over time the premier's office the dictatorial power of monarchs.

In the post-modern era the FPTP voting system in combination with Westminster parliamentary governance model has evolved into the worst possible combination for representative democracy for the following reasons:

1. FPTP enables parties with a minority of the popular vote to form majority seat governments, that in turn strengthen executive power vis-a-vis the legislative assembly.
2. FPTP wastes a significant percentage of votes and results in lower voter turnout
3. FPTP does not assign equal weight or value to votes
4. FPTP, in Canada, contributes to excessive, and harmful party discipline
5. FPTP does not permit accurate representation of BC's social mosaic
6. FPTP exacerbates BC's political polarization
7. FPTP encourages public policy making that is shaped more by the short-term partisan interest of the party in power than the long-term public interest
8. FPTP encourages negative and tactical voting

Solution

The questions that this public commission must address are:

1. How does the method of representative selection affect the structure of governance?
2. What deficiencies are to be found in the current electoral system?
3. How would proposed changes improve the situation?
4. What electoral system reform should be recommended?

Given the gravity of the deficiencies associated with FPTP I believe it is important that we look for alternatives.

There are two basic problems that need redress. First, political power needs to be redistributed; and second, political power needs to be made accountable. Therefore, it is of vital importance that a two-pronged approach be implemented to combat these tendencies. What does this mean in terms of electoral reform? First, it means flattening out the political hierarchy by empowering private members in the legislative assembly vis-a-vis the executive. Second, it must make the executive branch accountable to the members and the members accountable to the people who elected them.

Proportional representation (PR) as I will argue can eliminate or least mitigate the all of the above problems associated with FPTP.

1. It eliminate false majority governments
2. It would significantly reduce the number of wasted votes
3. It would increase voter turnout
4. It would assign equal weight and value to votes
5. It would reduce party discipline because most governments would be governing coalitions

6. It would more accurately reflect BC's diversity
7. It would reduce political polarization
8. It would discourage negative and tactical voting

PR makes a much better match of seats with votes thus eliminating the possibility for false majority governments. The possibility of a wasted vote (over 50% on average in general multi-party elections produces two frequent rational voter responses: One, is a vote for a party that is not their first preference and two, non-participation at the polls come election time. PR rectifies both of these behaviours lending greater legitimacy to the result.

In the case of a safe seat not only are votes wasted on the opponents' side but also any extra votes above and beyond those necessary to defeat rival candidates. This leads to a phenomenon in plurality and majority voting systems in which votes have an unequal value. So the votes in closely contested constituencies have a greater value in terms of seats won per voting percentage. Because PR is broadly proportional, votes maintain their equal values in terms of electing seats.

In a multi-party PR system there are few instances where a single party achieves a true majority. Most PR electoral system governments are usually a coalition of two or more parties. This makes it harder for the premier and cabinet to enforce party discipline making the legislature more effective at holding the premier accountable.

In SMP party strategists attempt to get as many candidates that they believe will appeal to the majority, status quo voters, hence we find an over representation of white, male, middle class, middle age candidates. PR makes possible a more diverse make up of representatives because most votes count. Meaning parties have an incentive to run more candidates from the under represented cohorts e.g. women, visible minorities, working class, young people, etc.

FPTP has a tendency to reduce political contests to two parties because voters tend to vote tactically for fear that their true preferences will end up vote splitting, enabling their least favourite preference to win. PR eliminates the fear of vote splitting but it also results in coalition governments where partners must reach consensus on policy issues in order to govern. This has a chilling effect on partisan policy swings because ideologically opposed parties must find more central partners in order to form governments.

The Choice

Given that I have argued the superiority of PR over FPTP how do we choose one form of PR for the BC context?

There are basically three families of PR: Party-List; Mixed Member Proportional or Additional Member System (a combination of FPTP and Party-List); and Preference Voting

How we choose will depend on our goals, our selection criteria and the preferred governance model. If one thinks that a representing a geographical area should be the main criterion then MMP would be the choice. On the other hand, if one thinks that party and platform are the most important then Party-list will be the choice. However, if you think that citizens should decide then STV would be the suitable choice. Some citizens in expressing an opinion will opt for party and platform, others for their community and a local representative, and still others will select both, in a variety of combinations. The genius of STV is that empowers the voter to make these choices and that these choices are registered accurately.

As a radical democrat I want to see as much decision-making power devolved to the citizen base as is possible and that means giving citizens maximum choice in determining who their representatives are. The greater the choices available the more empowered citizens are.

Party politics are problematic because in a formal sense they allow for the coalescing of ideas around a central platform of proposed social policy agreed upon by the collective members of the party. However, substantively, they tend to become vehicles for the concentration of political power in the hands of a party elite who engage in the practices of vanguardism and real politick, whereby a select group of party strategists control party finances and policy. The end result is an undemocratic and pragmatic candidate selection. Giving voters limited say in candidate choice, policy formation, and implementation.

I have two primary concerns: a negative one -- placing limits on the concentration of power; and second a positive one – empowering citizens vis-à-vis privilege and power. While there are no perfect electoral systems most would agree that more choice is superior to less choice in terms of empowering citizens. The Single Transferable Vote (STV) system in multi-member electoral districts is superior to all other electoral systems because it maximizes voter choice.

Reviewing our objectives:

The objectives of a valid method of election may be defined as:

1. To determine the electors' preferences and, as far as possible, to give them effect;
2. To ensure that as many as possible of those who take part have an effect, and an equal effect, on the result;
3. To ensure that nearly every elector can identify among those elected representatives if their choice whom they have helped elect;
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Unlike the other PR systems where X voting is the norm, forcing voters to make choices based on an either/or selection process, preference voting on the other hand enables the voter to make sophisticated multi-criteria based choices. In the words of Nick Loenen, "Expressing a preference for a particular candidate, party, platform, or local issue, does not compel the voter to reject outright all other options. Instead of outright approval or rejection, preference voting is like

asking voters to register their likes and dislikes for many candidates and parties on a scale. Preference voting registers the degree of support present among all voters, not only for candidates and parties, but also for issues. And it does so with exceptional precision.”

Describing the effects of STV Colin Rosenstiel and James Woodward-Nutt have the following to say:

The sorting of voting papers according to first preferences in effect arranges the electors into generally unequal groups, each group supporting a single candidate. The transfers of surpluses and exclusions reduce the groups in number according to the number of places to be filled, and make the initially unequal groups each approximately equal to a quota.

The electoral is thus arranged into the desired number of nearly equal opinion groups, each group with its own representative.

Nearly every vote is effective in helping to secure the election of a chosen candidate.

Nearly every elector has an equal effect on the result and is directly represented by someone whom that voter has helped to elect.

In voting, different electors may attach different weights to several criteria simultaneously. The Single Transferable Vote gives proportional representation of this opinion structure of the electorate with an accuracy dependent only on the number of representatives simultaneously elected.

The Single Transferable Vote gives freedom of choice to electors and ensures, as far as possible, that the choice is satisfied and not distorted or frustrated.

Colin Rosenstiel James Woodward-Nutt 1997

It is this sophistication and the range of choice that is STV’s inherent strength, greatly overshadowing its weaknesses.

With STV and multi-member constituencies, parties would have a powerful electoral incentive to present a balanced team of candidates in order to maximize the number of higher preferences that would go to their sponsored candidates.

A STV system would limit the influence of powerful special interest groups on political parties. In addition it would restrict the influence of non-elected officials that reside in the premier’s office.

Criticisms of STV are several:

- (1) It is too complex for voters
- (2) It offers voters too much choice.
- (3) In rural areas representatives would come from cities
- (4) Vote counting is too complicated

- (5) High threshold requirement
- (6) Proportionality is not perfect

1. The criticism that it is too complex for voters denies the fact that as people voters rank preferences all the time in their day-to-day lives.
2. Too much choice – As consumers individuals are faced with a multiplicity of choice when it comes to product features, cost, quality, durability, etc. Besides there is nothing in STV that forces voters to rank order all the candidates. It is entirely up to the individual how many are ranked.
3. The argument that multi-member constituencies require large constituencies, particularly in rural areas belies the crucial fact that the constituency link is retained, albeit between several MPs and an enlarged constituency. The accountability of MPs to their constituency is actually increased in that, unlike single-member constituencies, no individual MP has a safe seat. This elimination of safe seats and safe candidates by enhancing intra-party competition means ideas that would have been swept up and discarded now have a greater opportunity to be voiced and discussed during election campaigns.
4. Vote counting is too complicated – certainly the way vote counting is handled is much more complicated but computer programs have been developed to handle the complexity in short order. Ballots are entered into the computer and the computer generates the results.
5. High threshold requirement to win a seat – this is a serious concern and one that needs to be thoughtfully addressed. There are two suggested remedies: (1) having a party top up list for significant opinion that fails to gain representation in the multi-member constituencies; (2) allowing small parties to group together for electoral purposes, thus forming a "cartel" or apparentement to contest the election. This means that the parties themselves remain as separate entities, and are listed separately on the ballot paper, but that votes gained by each party are counted as if they belonged to the entire cartel, thus increasing the chances that their combined vote total will be above the threshold and hence that they may be able to gain additional representation.
6. Proportionality not as high – this is only true if the average number of seats in multi-member constituencies is below 5.

Conclusion

First, it is my hope that this paper has made a cogent and convincing argument for the elimination of the single member plurality voting system in British Columbia. Second, that this paper has made a strong case for implementing a proportional single transferable vote as a superior replacement.

Single transferable vote (STV) offers voters much potential leverage over political parties and candidates, more than MMP or other forms of PR and in so doing fosters voter power.

STV creates an opportunity for diverse representation that single member systems lack, and because voters themselves rank the candidates, change is not entirely dependent on activism within the parties (as is often the case in party list systems). What this means is that wherever people can organize themselves around political goals they can pressure the system in two ways – indirectly through the parties, and directly through the voting system. This can happen because voters using STV number their choices. If their first choice is unpopular, or is wildly popular, then either the whole vote or a portion of the vote goes on to support their second choice, and so on. These transfers allow for some fairly sophisticated voting strategy and analysis, as well as contributing to the proportional result. Voters can number their support for all the candidates of a particular party or highlight other representational concerns that cross party lines. They can take a chance on a new party but give later preferences to a more established party thus ensuring they don't waste their vote or inadvertently help their opponents. Vote transfers also make public how voters understand the party system and parties themselves – which parties are seen to be more closely related to each other (and thus consistently receive transfer support) and which ideological elements within parties gain voter support (and which do not). All in all, STV is the most dynamic, sophisticated form of PR, combining proportional results for parties with a strong role for voters in being able to influence just which party members get elected.

"The key point about STV is that it reflects proportionally the individual's voting intentions far better than any other system. Every vote has equal value and the number of 'wasted' votes, i.e. those that failed to elect any candidate of the voter's choice, is extremely small. Its ability to empower the voter is its greatest asset, and will reward the best in party politics as much as it will penalize the worst." (Electoral Reform Society of the U.K.)

Recommendations:

1. That the Citizens' Assembly advocate changing the current FPTP to a PR electoral system
2. That the Citizens' Assembly advocate for STV as the most voter empowering form of PR
3. That the Citizens' Assembly advocate for a preference ballot for choosing a new electoral system
4. That the Citizens' Assembly advocate for municipal elections to use electoral systems other than SMP and Wards.