

A Submission to the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform

by

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Proposition:

The principle of the accountability of elected representatives to voters is of fundamental importance, and it can be respected in a mixed proportional representation system.

Summary:

1. It is argued that the principle of elected representatives being accountable to voters is the most important value in our democratic system, fundamentally more important than the principle of parties being represented in proportion to their total vote.
2. A mixed proportional representation system is advocated which would have a majority of representatives elected by voters in single-member constituencies as at present. Under-represented parties would be topped up by means of a variable number of party-list representatives, as required to achieve an outcome close to proportionality.
3. Some additional considerations, including other voting systems, are discussed.

1. Values

The debate about our system of democratic representation is also a debate about values. Which values are more important? There are advocates for party proportionality, geographical representation, representation of minority views, voter equality, and so on.

I believe the most fundamental value in our democratic system is *accountability*: that is, the accountability of an elected representative to actual voters in a community.

I believe this accountability is the cornerstone of the whole system that we have inherited from hundreds of years of democratic development. In particular, I believe it is more important than political party considerations, which I think are of minor importance (though that is what most people are focusing on in these deliberations). I believe the accountability of a representative to a constituency of voters is a value that should be retained through any reforms that we may enact.

I recognize that proportional representation has some merit, but its great flaw is that it will decrease the power of voters over their elected representatives and increase the power of political parties. I know this is not what many citizens want. A significant political movement of recent times (the Reform/Alliance) was based on making elected representatives more accountable, not less, to the voters.

The Assembly has identified local representation as an important issue. While I agree that it is, I believe that characterizing the issue as local representation misses the more fundamental point. What is really at stake is accountability to the voters.

In proportional representation, representatives are accountable to the political parties that select them. They are not accountable to actual voters. They owe their seats not to a constituency of voters, but to their party. They will do their party's bidding. They will be virtually beyond the reach of the voting public. Thus proportional representation would be like a Trojan horse in our democratic system — it would hold the seeds of destruction of the fundamental values that all of us should hold very dear.

With that in mind, I recommend that if it is considered necessary to introduce a mechanism to guarantee some proportionality of party representation in our electoral system, then there should be a bias toward accountable representation, and the proportional representation element should be given less weight — enough to mitigate the grossest imbalances and ensure at least some representation for minor parties.

2. Proposal

Specifically, I propose the following:

Leave the number of constituencies about the same as we have now, so as not to decrease the representation for northern constituencies. Then allow up to 25 seats for proportional representation. These seats would be filled only as needed to improve party proportionality. There is no need to reserve a specific number or percentage of seats for parties. It is important to my recommendation that seats for political parties should not be an entrenched feature of the system (e.g. 50% of the seats); they should be called upon only as necessary to even out gross disproportionalities.

Give each voter two ballots, one for a local candidate and one for a party. With up to 25 seats for parties, one seat would stand for 4% of the vote. Thus if the election resulted in political party representation that was within four percentage points of the actual proportion of votes received by each party, no seats would need to be filled by the vote for parties.

If the 2001 provincial election was re-run under this system, the Liberals would still have their majority, but the NDP would be much better represented and the Greens would be sparingly represented as well. In a more normal election, a result closer to true proportionality would be achieved. There would be some trade-off with the principle of accountability, but accountability would still be at the heart of the system.

3. Additional considerations

Here are some other things that are important to me in an electoral system:

Representation by population: everyone's vote should count the same. Either constituencies should have nearly equal populations, or representatives' votes in the legislature should be weighted by constituency population.

Campaign finance reform: ideas should count, not money.

The same treatment for all: constituencies should all be of the same type. There absolutely should not be different voting systems for different parts of the province, such as one system for rural voters and another for urban voters. Nor should there be a separate list for aboriginals, or any other type of affirmative action.

No multi-member constituencies: these only magnify the margin of victory for the most popular party. The premise is that a voter can pick candidates from different parties, but that is a naive expectation. It is not how most people vote. Generally a voter knows which party he or she supports and votes for that party's candidates only, so candidates for less popular parties get swamped. Smaller single-member constituencies are better able to capture small pockets of support. Results from provincial elections when B.C. had dual-member and multi-member constituencies bear this out — constituencies would usually elect both or all members from the same party. Whichever party won the general election, won bigger as a result.

Proportional representation by single transferable vote is too difficult to understand: while the principle may be simple, I believe most voters would have difficulty explaining exactly how the result is arrived at. A confusing system is a poor system. Additionally, it requires multi-member constituencies, which I believe are a very bad idea (see above). I believe the tendency of a voter in a multi-member constituency to vote for one party's candidates would persist in PR-STV (though it might be moderated somewhat), and this would negate true proportionality.

Alternative vote is a very poor idea: the fundamental flaw is that the voters whose judgement is so out of the main stream that they give their first-choice support to the least popular candidates are the very ones who get to decide the winner! It is said that this system ensures the winner will have at least 50% support, but 50% of what? This is a logically unsound system that was sensibly discarded in this province.