

A vote for change

Proportional representation makes for a more responsive government | by Linda Silver Dranoff



Our legal rights rest on the effectiveness of our democracy. Canadians count on regular elections to ensure that all of our voices are heard. But our current electoral system is seriously flawed—many of our votes don't count.

Under our current system, also known as first past the post, the number of votes cast for a party usually does not match its seat count. In the last Ontario election, for example, the Liberals won 66.9 per cent of the seats with 46.5 per cent of the popular vote; the Progressive Conservatives won 23.3 per cent of the seats with 34.7 per cent of the vote and the NDP won 6.8 per cent of the seats with 14.7 per cent of the vote. This disparity occurs in all provincial and the federal elections.

This unbalanced design makes voters try to trick the system. Many vote for the party whose candidate is believed to be able to defeat the party they want to oust. Others hesitate to “waste” their vote on a party with no hope of winning their riding or may not bother voting.

Under our current electoral system, minority opinions (e.g., women and seniors), minority groups (e.g., visible minorities) and minority parties (e.g., Green, NDP) have their voices muffled. Although women make up just over 50 per cent of the population, they account for only 17 per cent of Ontario MPPs and 20.8 per cent of federal MPs. Visible minorities comprise 19.1 per cent of Ontario's population yet only eight per cent of the legislature.

Electoral reform

That's why electoral reform is on the grassroots agenda across Canada, with

governments following behind. The Law Commission of Canada in 2004 recommended that the federal House of Commons move to a form of proportional representation (PR), called mixed member proportional (MMP).

In a 2005 B.C. referendum, 57.4 per cent of the voters and a plurality in 97 per cent of the ridings voted yes to PR. But since the B.C. government would not change the system without an arbitrary 60 per cent vote in favour, no change was made. Other provinces are debating PR.

Ontario will vote in a referendum on Oct. 10 between MMP and the status quo. Ontario's Citizens Assembly rec-

ommended a made-in-Ontario version of MMP, modelled on those in Germany, New Zealand, Scotland and Wales. Every voter would have two votes, one for the riding seat and one for the list seat. Ninety riding seats (70 per cent of the legislature) will continue geographic representation, and 37 list seats (30 per cent) will correct the imbalance. The lists, naming individuals in order of selection, would be created by each political party *before* the election, using an approved transparent method intended to ensure fair representation. A party must achieve a threshold of at least three per cent of all ballots cast to get a list seat.

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The Ontario government has set the same unfairly high threshold as B.C. did — 60 per cent of the voters must choose MMP, and at least 50 per cent of the vot-

Advantages of MMP

Women and minorities achieve fairer representation with MMP. Countries with MMP prove the point: in Germany, 32.2 per cent of members are women, and in New Zealand 30 per cent. In New Zealand, 10 per cent are Maori.

Coalition governments rather than majority governments are the rule, which requires legislators to work together collaboratively to achieve consensus. There are fewer wide swings in public policy between different ideologically driven parties. Voter turnout is higher.

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More parties will be formed, providing a greater diversity of opinion.

The biggest challenge to MMP is from those who allege it leads to unstable governments. This only happens in pure PR systems (election only by list), which can create instability, as shown by such countries as Israel and Italy. MMP is not a pure PR system but a hybrid, and countries with MMP have proven that stability and MMP do go together.

MMP is an important step in the right direction. For more info, go to www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca, www.fairvote canada.org and www.equalvoice.ca. ●

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