



Political Communication

Communicating Proportional Representation in Canada

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“Insanity: doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting different results.”
Attributed to Albert Einstein, Benjamin Franklin and Rita Mae Brown (depicted left-to-right)

The simple fact that variations of this quotation have been attributed to a variety of history’s greatest minds is reason enough to allow it some weight. This year, 2008, Canada held its third federal election in two years that achieved virtually nothing. None of the political parties achieved what they set out to do, there was a record low voter turnout and the Canadian people were subject to further unrepresentative results from an election costing approximately 300 million dollars in the middle of a global economic crisis (MacPherson 2008, ¶2). This paper aims to understand how to effectively communicate proportional representation as a viable option for Canadians through a discussion of the current setting, purpose of electoral systems, deficiencies in the current plurality system and arguments surrounding proportional representation.



For most people, elections are the only time they have the opportunity to partake in the democratic process, however a majority of the votes cast send no one to parliament (Howe 2000, p10). It is widely accepted that the quality of an electoral system directly influences the effectiveness of government between elections (Gregson 2004, ¶2). For quite some time, Canadians have been concerned about the disproportionate relationship between the popular vote and the distribution of seats in the legislature (Cairns 1968, p55). When asked about vote swapping, Barbara Odenwald, president of Fair Vote Canada, responded by claiming “the feudal voting system in this country is a continuing national embarrassment” (2008, p1). The 2008 record-low voter turnout can largely be linked to voter dissatisfaction. Reporter Janice Harvey mused that if “staying at home” was a ballot choice it would have enough votes to win (2008, ¶3). However it is significant that surveys still show Canadians thoroughly endorse democracy but feel the system needs to be rethought (The Economist 1999, p49).

In a research paper prepared for the Australian Parliamentary Library, Gerard Newman confirmed that political scientists agree that there is no ‘best’ system, “It has been acknowledged that all systems have flaws and problems” and electoral systems should be chosen to suit a population (Newman 2006, p4). Newman argues that an electoral system should be judged on its ability to reflect the will of the people, contribute to nation-building, maintain stability and peace, ensure voters feel effectively represented and its ease of comprehension and implementation (2006, p9). The recurring results of Canadian elections, declining voter-turnout and negative political sentiments of the Canadian population are evidence that the current pluralitarian system falls dramatically short (Howe 2000, p11). Although pundits often argue that a single party majority is necessary to form a functioning government, only 23% of Canadians surveyed agreed that the common occurrence of a party winning a majority of seats without a majority of votes under the first-past-the-post (plurality) system was acceptable (Howe 2000, p13).



Canada's first-past-the-post electoral system is an archaic model of single-member-plurality. This often results in governments being formed although placing second in the popular vote; for example in the 2006 New Brunswick, 1998 Quebec, 1996 British Columbia, and 1986 Saskatchewan provincial elections (Heard 2008, ¶15). This plurality means that a party's share of the vote has rarely borne any resemblance to their representation in parliament (ibid., ¶13). If the seats were distributed according to the popular vote in the 2008 election the results would be as follows: 117 Conservative seats, not 143; 81 Liberal seats, not 76; 57 NDP seats, not 37; 28 Bloc seats, not 50, 23 Green seats, not zero (Harvey 2008 ¶9). Instead of concern about a more proportional result in the 2008 Canadian election, there is more strategic voting, a split left and geographically splintered representation, a polarised political spectrum, disenfranchised voters and a lack of represented minorities (Harvey 2008 ¶1-4; Grubel 2004 ¶2-3; Brooker 2008). In 2000, a majority of Canadians surveyed felt that, "All parties are basically the same; there isn't really a choice" (Howe, p30). These attitudes are fostered by the plurality system where the political parties need to preach to the status quo. In a more proportional system this would not be as evident.

Although the adaptations vary, proportional representation is the most popular electoral system worldwide (Heard 2008, ¶20). The three main systems for proportional representation are party-list systems, additional or mixed-member systems or the single-transferable-vote. Party-lists systems elect candidates based on party votes in an order determined by the party (closed) or electors (open). Additional-member systems add unsuccessful candidates to parliament until it is proportional to the party vote. The single-transferable-vote in a multi-member-constituency is more complicated with candidates ranked in order of preference on a ballot. Benefits of all proportional representation systems include the increased representation of women and minority groups, reduced 'orphan voters,' increased voter turnout, representation of minor parties and independents, higher accuracy in representation of citizen opinions and better geographical distribution (Newman 2006, pp16-24).



Whilst there are obvious benefits to instituting a more proportional system of representation, there are many criticisms for its adoption in Canada. The historically important link and accountability structure between local member and electorate can become void in multi-member-constituencies that are inevitable in proportional representation systems (Newman 2006, p6). Party-lists are highly debated because closed-lists are seen to lack transparency and foster corruption whilst open-lists are too time consuming and confusing (MacPherson 2008, ¶11; Heard 2008, ¶20). A common pundit criticism is the seemingly ‘anti-capitalist’ nature of proportional representation. This link is drawn between increased taxes and lack of majority governments that are common in proportionally representative governments (Grubel 2004, ¶11). In a proportional system, the likelihood of forming a majority government significantly decreases. Therefore, most decisions are made in parliament or through coalitions instead of the government cabinet (ibid.). Although the need to consider more perspectives to pass a bill consistently results in better social policy, the obvious increase in government size and taxes is presumed to slow economic growth (ibid., ¶10). The final major criticism is that the systems of allocating seats can be complex and therefore risk being difficult to comprehend (Newman 2006, p24).

After much review it becomes evident that the most common criticisms stem from party-list systems and a misunderstanding of coalition governing. The problems with party-list systems can easily be overcome by using an additional-member system with the additional members drawn by popularity ranking or smallest margins (for example, first on the Conservatives list could have been Wai Young who was defeated in Vancouver South by only 22 votes). After entering a third consecutive minority government in Canada, the persistent irrational fears of minority governing should be surprising. In proportionally represented governments majorities are a rarity, therefore coalition building skills have become well developed (Altman 2000, p260). Claims that big government and higher taxation slows economic growth are only valid if it is unproductive spending (Salmond 2006, p3). However, research has shown that highly



capitalist countries with lower taxes and less social policy lead to economic inequality and significantly slower growth over time (Salmond, p6). Recent studies show that bigger government, if due to better social policy and corporate regulation, foster steady economic growth (Salmond 2006, p3). The adversarial ideal of a two party system is long since past in Canada (BCCA n.d. p2). This should be seen as an opportunity to innovate with an electoral system that can better represent Canada's diverse multiparty system.

"Ideally, democratic citizens must learn much more if they are to participate effectively in setting the system's agenda and persuading policy makers."(Gastil 2008, p8)

John Gastil, University of Washington professor, emphasises that the root of most western political problems is education and the lack of a politically informed citizenry (ibid., p8). Strathclyde professor Brian McNair claims, "...the normative assumption of a 'rational' citizenry is not realistic" (2007, p21). Furthermore, the media is largely responsible for setting the political agenda and being the platform upon which much of it is played out (Gastil 2008, p58). As discussed earlier, most criticisms of proportional representation in Canadian media have been toward specific models; if the media continue to set the agenda accordingly, Canadian citizens will remain misinformed. For example, the dichotomy drawn between socialism and capitalism after the communist era are consistently used to manipulate public fear whenever socially centred politics are being discussed (ibid., p91). The media frequently labels things 'anti-capitalist' because they, and their advertisers, are large corporations; it is in their best interest to attack politics of regulation and social democracy because they are the only ones that might have anything to lose (Herman 2006, p258). Furthermore, negativity is a cornerstone of news media and journalists often achieve this criteria by capitalising on public mistrust of the government (Kay 1998, p2). Our current deregulated, stagnant, saturated and sensationalised media scope makes it difficult to achieve significant socio-political change such as electoral reform (Golding & Elliot 1999, p633). Apart from these communication problems, Robert Testa recognises that, "...once in power under the first-past-the-post



system; the political party that may have once wanted to put into effect the system of proportional representation would most likely have a change in thought” (2008, p1).

Although there is no perfect electoral system and Canadians will find fault with all of them, I propose that an additional-member proportional representation system with a popularity ordered list and less adversarial party discipline would more appropriately suit Canadians than the current single-member-plurality electoral system (Newman 2006, p25; Howe 2000, p16). Furthermore, the relative simplicity and transparency of this proportionally representative system would likely reach wide acceptance if communicated effectively. However, this cannot be easily achieved without a collective, informative and communicative effort from within the public sphere; the citizenry, government and media. Whichever electoral alternatives may be put forward, many agree that to continue with the current electoral system and expect anything to change could be defined simply by conventional wisdom as ‘insane’ (Franklin, Einstien & Brown n.d.).



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