

Two Deeply Different Dynamics

It isn't really possible to give an opinion on the planned electoral reform since we do not know which of the many proportional voting systems will be proposed. In this area, even more so than in others, the devil is in the details.

Moreover, it is important to remember that the existing voting system is deeply different from proportional representation, a critical point that subject matter experts seem to be overlooking because they are so focused on the differences between the various proportional voting systems.

If we were to do away with the existing system and adopt a proportional voting system, the changes would not just be technical or procedural. They would be structural. In substance, if not in law, these changes appear to be constitutional in nature and could redefine Canada's political culture and the way democracy and governance work in our country.

If we also take into account the fact that this would be the first time that the voting system has been changed since 1867, one can argue that this electoral reform would be the most significant reform made by the current government.

Advantages and disadvantages

Although we do not know what type of proportional voting system will be proposed, we are very familiar with the existing system. The existing system is widely criticized, often unfairly, for reasons associated with the prevailing "progressive" political correctness. Another reason is that more value is being placed on representational requirements than on governance requirements. What is more, Canada's unique identity is being all but forgotten.

Historically, the first past the post system has ensured that our democracy has continued to work effectively, since the heart of any functioning democracy is the peaceful replacement, at more or less regular intervals, of partisan teams in power. Our system achieved so partly through electoral sweeps, which result when the number of seats allocated to the winning party is disproportionate to the number of votes the party received.

That is how this type of voting system recently allowed the Conservative government, which some people thought was unbeatable because of the division in the left-wing opposition, to be replaced by a majority Liberal government to the satisfaction of Canadians.

Proportional voting systems are more effective in ensuring that the various political opinions of the population are represented in Parliament. However, under such a system, a big party can stay in power for a very long time by adjusting its approach after each election through the formation of temporary alliances with smaller parties.

That is what happened in Italy after the Second World War when the Christian Democrat Party ruled for almost half a century, some people being concerned that adopting a preferential ballot process in Canada would benefit the Liberal Party in an similar manner.

The disadvantage of the existing voting system is the discrepancy between the number of seats won by a party and its percentage of votes. One of the main arguments in favor of adopting a proportional voting system is that it would decrease people's disillusionment with the political process and increase voter turnout.

The results of studies on the subject are tentative at best. Professor André Blais, who appeared before the committee on July 27, 2016, said that, while proportional representation might "slightly increase" voter turnout and would almost certainly enhance voters' evaluation of the fairness of elections, it was very unlikely to make Canadians more satisfied overall.

The reality is that people in every liberal democracy are disillusioned with the political process, regardless of what voting system their country uses. According to many Canadians, a dysfunctional Senate with no political legitimacy has been a greater discredit to our democratic system in recent years than the first past the post voting system.

In the turmoil caused by globalization, where powerless democratic States constitute a real threat, proportional voting systems require the various parties to work together and form coalition governments, which, by definition, are more unstable than what Canadians are used to, strong and dischargeable governments.

Because MPs are elected to their territorial ridings by a majority, they are closely connected, in a nearly physical way, to their constituents. The existing voting system therefore has the advantage of being simple and easy to understand for everyone. In comparison, proportional voting systems are more complicated and involve a more conceptual and ideological understanding of politics.

There is a price to pay if we want to make the number of seats correspond to the percentage of votes. Some MPs will no longer be directly chosen by voters. Proportional voting systems also have a tendency to “nationalize” the selection of elected representatives.

Tellingly, the motion moved in the House of Commons to form this Committee did not make any reference to Canada’s regional differences. It merely indicated that one goal was “the inclusion of all Canadians in our diverse society, including women, Indigenous Peoples, youth, seniors, Canadians with disabilities, new Canadians, and residents of rural and remote communities”.

However, unlike New Zealand and Germany, two countries to which Canada is often compared in this regard, Canada is a huge country, where there have always been profound regional and linguistic differences.

What I took away from the meeting your Committee held on July 27 is that a proportional voting system could hamper the ability of our political system to take into account Canada’s regional nature, which is something that is not being accomplished by the existing Senate as it should do. Witnesses drew attention to the fact that a proportional voting system would make it more difficult for one party to dominate a particular region, for example, the Conservative Party in Western Canada or the Bloc Québécois in Quebec.

Process and referendum

That brings me to the second part of my presentation, which I believe is the most important, and that is the fact that we should not take a 150-year-old institution that is at the heart of our country’s political culture away from Canadians without a genuine consensus.

Although experts are the ones analyzing the existing voting system, they should not be the ones who determine the future of the structural political institution that is Canada’s voting system.

Given Canada's Westminster-style parliamentary tradition, I do not see how the government can say that a consensus has been reached on a *de facto* constitutional issue if it does not have the support of the Official Opposition.

If the Official Opposition refuses to support the new system, Canadians should be invited to participate in a referendum and choose between the existing voting system, which has obvious advantages, and one or more types of proportional voting systems, which will be decided upon by your committee following consultations with experts and ordinary Canadians.

We are talking about the legitimacy of a reform whose very objective is to make the political process more legitimate in the eyes of Canadians. Canadians should not feel as though the reform is a show of force by the elite, the majority of whom are opposed to the existing system, since this would set a precedent for future governments who would then be able to make more changes without having to obtain the support of the Official Opposition or citizens via a referendum.

Those who believe that a referendum on the issue would serve only to kill the reform obviously have very little confidence in their ability to convince Canadians that the fundamental changes they are proposing are in Canada's best interest. What is more, their vision of democracy is clearly not in keeping with the essence of the government's plan.

Let us remember that, although electoral reform was rejected in referendums held in Ontario and Prince Edward Island, it was approved in 2005 by 57% of British Columbians. However, the problem was that the threshold was set at 60%.

In New Zealand, referendums were a key component of the reform process. In 1992, the government first asked voters if they wanted a change. Then it asked them to choose a new voting system. A total of 84.7% of voters supported a change in the system, and 70.5% voted for a mixed member proportional system.

New Zealanders voted on the issue again in 1993 and 2011 and decided both times to keep that system.

Christian Dufour, Montreal, August 18, 2016