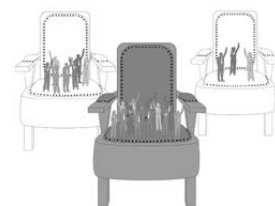


CANADIAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE VOTING SYSTEM



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A recent Ipsos-Reid poll reveals that Canadians are not very well informed about their electoral system: Half believe MPs must win more than half the votes cast to win their seat, while governments must win a majority of seats. But they do know what they want from the system: stability and majority government. If forced to choose, however, they would prefer a system in which parliamentary representation was proportional to votes cast to a system designed to produce strong, stable governments. Electoral reform is currently at the bottom of most Canadians' list of priorities, but if priorities changed, PR might have widespread support.

Un récent sondage Ipsos-Reid a montré que les Canadiens sont plutôt mal renseignés sur leur système électoral. La moitié des personnes interrogées croient ainsi que les députés doivent obtenir une majorité de voix pour remporter leur siège, et que les gouvernements doivent également rassembler une majorité de sièges pour être élus. Les Canadiens savent toutefois ce qu'ils attendent du système électoral : un gouvernement stable et majoritaire. Forcés de choisir, ils privilégieraient cependant un système assurant une représentation parlementaire proportionnelle aux suffrages exprimés. Quoiqu'il en soit, la perspective d'une réforme électorale suscite peu d'intérêt chez nos concitoyens. Mais si leurs priorités devaient changer, ils appuieraient sans doute largement un système de représentation proportionnelle.

Although Canadians do not fully understand how federal governments are elected in Canada, they appear to want the benefits of both the current electoral system and of proportional representation (PR). In view of Canadians' low awareness of electoral reform and the low priority they place on it, it is clear that this issue is far from having reached political maturity in Canada. But it is also clear that the seeds of public discontent exist and that Canadians have great sympathy for the concept of PR.

With the increasing regionalization of Canadian federal politics since 1990, the implications of Canada's first-past-the-post election system upon smaller parties have become increasingly evident. The disparity between the portion of the vote received by smaller parties and their representation in the House of Commons has become even more stark, leaving certain provinces without significant representation in the government. Moreover, the fracturing of the opposition has significantly reduced the possibility of a change of government, further highlighting the disproportionate power which Canada's parliamentary system awards to a single national party when there are no other large national parties.

In February 2001 Ipsos-Reid interviewed a representative national sample of 1,000 adult Canadians by telephone regarding these issues, and the results are presented in the following pages. These survey findings show that although Canadians like the idea of an election system which provides both stability and representation, they do not fully understand how governments are formed in Canada and they do not yet place high priority on the issue of electoral reform.

Our results show that a significant number of Canadians do not understand the first-past-the-post federal electoral system which Canada has used since Confederation. Fully 50 per cent of our respondents believe that a candidate must get a majority of all votes cast in a riding in order to win a Parliamentary seat. And 47 per cent believe that a political party must win a majority of all votes cast in order to form the government. Thus, one-half of Canadians do not understand the basic mechanisms which govern political representation in Canada.

Most Canadians do recognize that Canada does not use a system of proportional representation, however—79 per

cent say that parties do not get a percentage of seats proportionate to their share of the popular vote. On the other hand, almost one in five Canadians (18 per cent) does believe that this is how Parliament works.

In general, Canadian men appear to be somewhat better informed about electoral mechanics than women. They are 10 per cent to 15 per cent more likely to answer these questions correctly. And while university graduates were significantly more likely to answer our questions correctly, roughly one-third of degree-holders believe that both governments and individual candidates must receive a clear majority of votes in order to win.

Beyond these widespread misperceptions, any group espousing proportional representation in Canada would face the additional hurdle that most Canadians (64 per cent) have not even heard the phrase “proportional representation,” let alone developed an informed opinion about this alternative. Barely a third—only 36 per cent—say they have heard the term. Men (42 per cent) are much more likely than women (29 per cent) to say they have heard of PR. Canadians under 35 (29 per cent) are less likely than older Canadians (40 per cent).

Thus, any debate in Canada today about electoral reform would be conducted in an atmosphere of relatively low understanding of precisely what system is to be reformed. When one half of Canadians do not understand how the first-past-the-post system works and one fifth believe Canada already uses PR, it may be difficult to frame the debate.

What do Canadians want from their electoral system? Our survey results warn that Canadians want their electoral system to provide wide-ranging and somewhat contradictory results. For example, 92 per cent want the electoral system to provide governments with good representation from different regions. This finding, which is found across all provinces, is not necessarily inconsistent with the current system, but it does indicate an unwillingness to see the country governed by non-national parties. However, to the extent that any system allowed the victory of regionally-based parties, Canadians would be uncomfortable with it.

Further, 71 per cent believe that the electoral system should produce “strong majority governments that can get things done,” while 76 per cent believe that the electoral system should produce stable governments, able to rule for four or five years before another election is called. Based

on the historical record, both in Canada and elsewhere, these preferences would appear to argue against proportional representation and in favour of Canada’s current electoral system. However, 64 per cent of Canadians believe that Canada’s electoral system should award seats in Parliament in proportion to the popular vote received by each party, which is of course the definition of PR. Although this belief that seats should be awarded in proportion to the popular vote decreases with higher education, the majority of university graduates (58 per cent) do hold this view.

Thus, while Canadians are strongly attached to the oft-cited benefits of Canada’s current system, namely stability and efficacy, fully two-thirds also support a radically different approach along the lines of PR. Canadians do not think in terms of opposing electoral models, of course, and are free to demand an electoral system which does not exactly match either Westminster-style parliamentary democracy or traditional PR. These findings tell us that they place importance on pragmatic issues such as stability and efficacy as well as on representation issues such as regionalism and proportionality to the popular vote.

In terms of possible conflicts between efficacy and representation, many Canadians (47 per cent) accept the suggestion that it would be impossible to form a majority government under a system that gave seats to any party which received a significant number of votes.

Future research should look more deeply at the preferences Canadians express when forced to *choose* between the various aspects of electoral systems discussed above. This study provides one clue, however. When asked to choose between a system which produces strong majority governments and a system which gives each party a number of seats in proportion to its popular vote, Canadians choose the latter system by a margin of 60 per cent to 36 per cent. Thus, a solid majority of Canadians would prefer a proportionately representative system to a system designed primarily to produce strong, stable governments. Support for a PR system is lower among Canadians over 55 (48 per cent) than among those between 35 and 54 (61 per cent) or between 18 and 34 (69 per cent)

When asked directly whether Canada’s electoral system should be changed to provide PR in the House of Commons, the majority of Canadians (59 per cent) say yes. Thirty-eight per cent say no. While recognizing the embryonic

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state of the debate and the low level of awareness among many Canadians, it is nonetheless striking that a solid majority of Canadians support the implementation of a PR system. Support for proportional representation declines among Canadians with higher education and income, but still retains its majority.

Many Canadians appear to recognize that all electoral systems draw compromises between idealism and practicality. This is reflected by the fact that 76 per cent believe “Canada’s voting system represents a good compromise between democracy and the need for effective and stable government.”

Electoral reform does not top the public policy agenda of Canadians, and indeed trails far behind at least three other issues in their minds. When asked to rate the relative importance of health care, education, tax reform and electoral reform, Canadians consistently place the lowest importance on electoral reform. For example, while 51 per cent say that health care is the most important priority among these four issues and 26 per cent place similar priority on education, only 6 per cent put the highest priority on “reforming Canada’s voting system.” Sixteen per cent say that tax reform should top the list. While priorities obviously vary across individuals, 76 per cent of Canadians nonetheless put voting reform at the bottom of the list.

When health care, education and tax reform are compared to “reforming the way our democracy works,” the priority ranking remains the same, with 60 per cent putting electoral reform at the bottom of their priority list—which confirms that this policy prioritization is no accident of terminology.

Given that many Canadians do not understand how the electoral system works, while most have never heard of PR, it is clear that Canada is not yet ready for an informed debate on electoral reform. It is also clear that issues such as health care, education and tax reform are more important to Canadians at this juncture. They want their electoral system to provide many features, which neither the current system nor proportional representation can provide. Even so, a majority of Canadians are drawn to PR, in theory if not in name, and say they place higher priority on fair representation than on stability. The lack of public interest or debate regarding electoral reform in Canada should not be misconstrued as satisfaction with the status quo.

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John Godfrey, MP



Tom Courchene



Hugh Segal with *Toronto Star* columnists James Travers and Chantal Hébert

**IRPP book launch
“A State of Minds” by
Senior Scholar Tom Courchene
January 17, 2001, Ottawa**