Electoral reform and tensions in the Canadian federation

BY BRIAN K. SMITH

There's a notion, percolating almost underground in Canadian society, that Canada's electoral system is broken.

The latest group to champion the cause of electoral reform has adopted a name suggesting that Canada's system is inherently unfair. "*Fair Vote Canada*" complains that the first-past-the-post voting system greatly exaggerates regional differences. That's not the only criticism of the system. But in a nation with the size and diversity of Canada, it's a damning indictment.

Canada operates with a constituency voting system, commonly known as "first-past-the-post". Each district elects the candidate who wins the most votes – which does not have to be a majority of votes. The more candidates there are, the smaller the percentage of votes needed to win.

Canada adopted the system in the nineteenth century. Several Canadian provinces have tried alternatives over the years but now use the first-past-post system.

Despite its ubiquity, this system produces some odd results.

Twice in the last decade, political parties that lost the popular vote won majority governments in provincial legislatures. Occasionally, parties have won every single seat in a provincial legislature, simply by having their support spread evenly among the various constituencies.

But critics suggest the system has more insidious effects.

Exaggerates regional divisions

Louis Massicotte, of the Université de Montréal, writes: "The most common criticism of the existing system is that it fosters national division."

Massicotte is one of a growing number of political scientists who are examining the anomalies of the Canadian electoral system. "Regional variations in party support are exaggerated by the electoral system, and the country appears more polarized than it really is. Electoral regionalism is an undeniable fact of Canadian life…. However, the first-past-the-post system has exaggerated this regionalism by amplifying both the strengths and weaknesses of parties in different regions. The existing electoral system … has rewarded parties with strong regional appeal, and disadvantaged weaker nationally-oriented parties that attract votes more evenly from one region to another."

A glance at the Canadian House of Commons would confirm that complaint. Recent election results leave the impression that political opinion in western Canada is overwhelmingly right of centre with deep grievances against the rest of the country. Quebec, which has debated separation for a generation and more, sent a large majority of separatist-minded politicians to Ottawa, in two straight elections. And Ontario, with a strong Conservative government provincially, has returned more than 95% Liberals to the House of Commons, in three straight elections.

Is Canada really this balkanized?

In Parliament, yes. In the country, probably not.

In the most recent election in 2000, the governing Liberals won about 2.3 million votes in Ontario. That was about twice as many votes as the opposition Canadian Alliance, but it resulted in 50 times as many seats. In the West, the electoral anomaly was reversed. The Liberals received about 950,000 votes in the four Western provinces - about half the Alliance - but they only received one-fifth as many seats.

Some observers believe this is a temporary phenomenon. After all, Canada was shaken by a political crisis ten years ago, when a constitutional package was defeated in a referendum, followed by the emergence of new political parties that fundamentally opposed the status quo.

But even during earlier periods the parliament was no less divided. In the seventies and eighties, western Canada sent Conservatives to Ottawa out of all proportion to their actual popular support in that region, while Quebec remained a virtual Liberal fiefdom at the national level for most of a century, despite significant popular support for other parties there.

Ideological imbalances and "false majorities"

Those advocating reform argue that a different voting system would reflect Canada's regional variances for what they really are: one way in which Canadians differ from each other and not entrenched animosities.

There are other problems with the first-past-the-post system too.

Fair Vote Canada complains, "Canada's winner-take-all voting system has the unfortunate and unsettling habit of dramatically distorting the voices of voters. Typically, in federal elections, the voting system creates false majority governments where 40% of the popular vote, for example, is translated into 50% to 60% of the seats."

With multiple parties, candidates frequently win with less than 30% of the vote. A majority of the voters have said "no" to the eventual winner, leaving many people disillusioned about the electoral system. That disillusionment has translated into declining voter turnout, from about 70% during the 1970's and 1980's to just 60% in the most recent election.

Modified p-r

Academics, journalists, politicians and others have been pointing out the weaknesses of the Canadian electoral system for years – and proposing solutions

Back in 1979, the Pépin-Robarts Task Force on Canadian Unity warned about the growing "sense of alienation and exclusion" across Canada.

"When party membership in the central parliament becomes concentrated in regional blocks," the Task Force said, "It is an advance signal of eventual disintegration. The regional polarization of federal political parties corrodes federal unity. Because we see developing signs of such a situation in Canada, we have come to the conclusion that electoral reform is urgent and of a very high priority. The simple fact is that our elections produce a distorted image of the country, making provinces appear more unanimous in their support of one federal party or another than they really are."

Pépin and Robarts recommended a modified form of proportional representation (or p-r). From each province, 20% of the seats would be set aside on a compensatory basis, with those seats being distributed among parties, to ensure the total accurately reflects the popular vote in that province.

Modified p-r is used in many modern democracies, notably Germany. The fact that the percentage of proportional seats would be fairly small would likely assure that Canada would still have majority governments (or at least governments in which one party holds a large plurality of the seats and thus a relatively strong minority position). Pure p-r tends to produce multi-party coalitions.

In 1979 Pépin-Robarts represented the view of a significant element of Canada's political establishment. However, their views were lost in the upheaval of other changes, leading, in 1982, to fundamental amendments to the Canadian constitution. Since then, the case for electoral reform the Pépin-Robarts Task Force made has been taken up by a series of unlikely allies.

Two political opponents came together last year to pursue the campaign for some form of proportional representation. Judy Rebick is a political activist, feminist, broadcaster and author. Walter Robinson is federal director of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation and a broadcaster as well. As they noted gleefully in an essay they distributed:

"Judy Rebick leans to the left. Walter Robinson leans to the right."

"As two individuals from opposite ends of the political spectrum who disagree on most issues, we wholeheartedly agree on one thing: Changing our electoral system to better represent the wishes of voters is an urgent necessity.

"Versions of proportional representation systems are employed in more than 90 jurisdictions and can be tailored to reflect the needs of different countries. For example, some people believe a German system of combining first-past-the-post and proportional representation might be most suitable to Canada. Such a system would retain the concept of members of parliament representing traditional ridings, while the overall result would better reflect the voters' wishes."

Editorial boards at several Canadian newspapers have also joined this quiet campaign.

However, there's a powerful institutional obstacle to electoral change. (Perhaps surprisingly, the electoral system is not covered by the Canadian constitution, which in twenty years has proven almost impervious to change.)

The simple fact is that governing parties owe their success to the existing system. Politicians who win office with a particular set of rules usually believe they can do so again. Inertia is seldom as powerful as when combined with self-interest.

On the agenda in Quebec

Ironically, a notable exception exists in the one province that has been consumed by the debate about whether to leave Canada. Quebec is the second most populous province and the only one that is predominantly French speaking. The governing Parti Quebecois (which advocates political independence for Quebec) struggled for years inside the constraints of the first-past-the-post system. In its first election, in 1970, it gained almost a quarter of the popular vote (putting it in second place in that regard to the victorious Liberal party of Quebec) but fewer than seven per cent of the seats. Partly as a result of this experience the Parti Québecois has advocated some form of proportional representation from its earliest days

It is a policy that has survived, though it has never been implemented.

The first P-Q government lasted from 1976 to 1985. In 1994, the party swept back into power, benefiting this time from the existing electoral system. Then in 1998, it handily won re-election, despite losing the popular vote to the provincial Liberal Party. In the polarized politics of Quebec's sovereignty debate, the Liberals won massive support among English-speaking and other non-francophone voters. But those votes were concentrated in relatively few ridings, while the Parti Quebecois won most of the predominantly French-speaking seats.

Regardless of this fact, the P-Q remains committed to the idea of change, a commitment Quebec's new Minister Responsible for Electoral Reform, Jean-Pierre Charbonneau, recently reaffirmed.

Quebec is also home to a political action group that advocates electoral change. "*Le Mouvement pour une Démocratie Nouvelle*" shares some of "*Fair Vote Canada's* " sense of outrage.

The skewed results of first-past-the-post elections inevitably skew political debates and policy choices, as well. At the national level, debates have become regionalized. The principal opposition parties represent western Canada and Quebec, almost exclusively. They often focus debate on issues that can prolong resentment among their constituencies, further exaggerating regional tensions.

The strongest argument for maintaining a first-past-the-post regime is that it at least produces majority governments with stability in policy direction. However, in Canada, the regional tensions that are a by-product of the system are likely having the opposite effect. The stability in government is offset by the *in*stability inherent in regionally based political parties.

In a nation beset by tensions between the federal and provincial governments, an ongoing separatist debate and simmering cases of regional resentment, that type of instability can hardly be a good thing. ✑