

Reforming the electoral system

If you have been following politics recently you may know that there is a debate currently waging over what type of electoral system Canada should use for the next election. As someone who studied electoral reform I thought it may be valuable to give readers a taste of why our current First Past the Post system needs to be changed. Although there are advantages to First Past the Post: strong regional representation, a simple ballot, an efficient counting method; there are many significant disadvantages.

First and foremost, the number of voters that are represented by FPTP is far below that of the average system. In elections past, support from just over a third of the country has given a party a mandate with 100 per cent of the power. In fact, in the most recent election, despite a landslide victory, the Liberal Party only amassed approximately 39.5 per cent of support from the electorate according to Elections Canada. That means that essentially 60.5% of Canadian voters in 2015 had no say in how their country is going to be governed over the next term.

This problem is also evident in riding results. Each federal election, there are dozens of cases where an individual candidate will win with 30 per cent to 35 per cent support, leaving the remainder of the voters out to dry. In the 2015 election, there were several instances where this occurred, most notably in the riding of Saint-Hyacinthe-Bagot, Quebec.

According to Elections Canada, approximately, 71.4 per cent of those who voted in that riding had no say in the result. Yes, our First Past the Post system does an excellent job representing each individual region, but how well is it actually representing the voters within these regions? This seems like a relevant question when considering other systems have the ability to represent these regions more adequately.

Along with misrepresentation, the presence of negative electoral rhetoric can be attributed to First Past the Post. Although in 2015 we did see the use of positive advertising surge, the reality is that each party used negative advertising. In our system, voters only get a single selection. It is logical for parties and politicians to use negative ads and sentimentality to show that other parties are not as viable, and that their party is the option to go with.

In all other systems we could choose from, voters are given the ability to make more than one choice. In these alternative systems, politicians and parties no longer have to prove that an opponent is the wrong choice because a vote given to the opposing party will not necessarily mean a lost vote for their own party.

Furthermore there is incentive to eliminate negative advertising because it repels strong supporters of other parties who would have the ability to select more than one party under a reformed system. In essence, to adopt reform is to eliminate annoying election rhetoric.

Finally, in the past, First Past the Post has produced flawed results. It is one thing for a party to be over represented; it is another for an undeserving party to come to power. An excellent example of this is the British Columbia election in 1997. To make a long story short, the winning party received approximately two per cent less support across the province than did the party of the official opposition. With support more spread out across ridings, the governing party was able to win 6 more seats than the opposition and form a majority government. It is anti-democracy that a party can accumulate the most support yet still lack the ability to govern and have no input in passing legislation. Although a case like this is rare, introducing reform would eliminate such a case from reoccurring.

Change can be unnerving, especially when it involves something as important as how a country is governed. However, when a system is so flawed that it is producing undesirable results to this extent, it should be found such a change is necessary.

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