

CANADIAN STUDY
OF
PARLIAMENT GROUP



Electoral System Reform:
What are the options?

Paper by
Dr. André Blais
Department of Political Science
Université de Montréal

**Canadian
Study of Parliament
Group**

The Canadian Study of Parliament Group (CSPG) was created with the object of bringing together all those with an interest in parliamentary institutions and the legislative process, to promote understanding and to contribute to their reform and improvement.

The constitution of the Canadian Study of Parliament Group makes provision for various activities, including the organization of conferences and seminars in Ottawa and elsewhere in Canada, the preparation of articles and various publications, the establishment of workshops, the promotion and organization of public discussions on parliamentary affairs, participation in public affairs programs on radio and television, and the sponsorship of other educational activities.

Membership is open to all those interested in Canadian legislative institutions.

Applications for membership and additional information concerning the Group should be addressed to the Secretariat, Canadian Study of Parliament Group, Box 660, West Block, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0A6. Tel: (613) 943-1228, Fax: (613) 995-5357.

**Members of the
Board of Directors
2004**

President

Jeffrey Heynen

Vice-President

James R. Robertson

Treasurer

Antonine Campbell

Secretary

Till Heyde

Past President

Dianne Brydon

Directors

William Cross

David Docherty

Jacques Gagnon

Susan Harada

Tranquillo Marrocco

Peggy Morgan

Charles Robert

F. Leslie Seidle

Jennifer Smith

Christine Trauttmansdorff

Introduction

On February 27, 2004, the Canadian Study of Parliament Group held a conference on the subject of “Electoral Reform and Its Parliamentary Consequences”. The conference was held in the Centre Block of Parliament Hill.

The idea of the conference was to think about electoral reform in political and parliamentary terms. In other words, what might electoral reform mean for the system of political parties? Would it increase the number of political parties? Would it put an end to one-party majority governments? Would coalition governments be required? Will this mean the creation of Parliamentary-based parties with reduced emphasis on constituency-based representation? Will minority and coalition governments become the norm?

Professor André Blais, Department of Political Science, University of Montreal, delivered the opening address on “Electoral System Reform: What are the options?”. His address, reprinted hereafter, is a model of clarity, and stimulated a lively discussion. Next was a panel on electoral reform in the provinces, chaired by Bernard Colas, Vice-President of the Law Commission of Canada. The participants on the panel were Hon. Norman Carruthers, Commissioner, Prince Edward Island Commission on Electoral Reform; Professor R. Kenneth Carty, Department of Political Science, University of British Columbia and research director of B.C.s People’s Electoral Commission; Professor William Cross, Department of Political Science and Centre for Canadian Studies, Mount Allison University, and research director of New Brunswick’s Electoral Commission; André Fortier, Secrétaire adjoint, Secrétariat à la réforme des institutions démocratiques, Gouvernement du Québec; and Professor Matthew Mendelsohn, normally of the Department of Political Studies, Queen’s University, now serving as Deputy Minister, Democratic Renewal Office, Government of Ontario. The panel participants updated the conference on the electoral reform efforts in British Columbia, New Brunswick, PEI, and Ontario. An animated discussion among the audience and the panelists ensued.

At lunch, the keynote speaker was the Hon. Bernard Lord, Premier of New Brunswick. Premier Lord outlined his concerns about the democratic deficit and the need to re-examine some foundations of the political system, in particular, the electoral system.

The panel in the afternoon addressed the topic of the “Consequences of Electoral Reform and Minority Government”. Chaired by Professor Louis Massicotte, Department of Political Science, Université de Montréal, the panel included the following participants: Professor Peter Aucoin, Eric Denis Memorial Professor of Government, Department of Political Science, Dalhousie University; Professor Cristine de Clercy, Department of Political Studies, University of Saskatchewan; Professor Ailsa Henderson, Department of Political Science, Wilfrid Laurier University, and Professor Jennifer Smith, Department of Political Science, Dalhousie University. The panelists talked about minority and coalition governments in Canada; the likelihood of either one or both in the wake of the adoption of a system of proportional representation; and the possibility of an increased role for the head of state, should minority and/or coalition governments become more common. Following another lively discussion of these issues by the audience and the panelists, the conference chair, Professor David Docherty, Department of Political Science, Wilfrid Laurier University, brought the proceedings to a close.

Electoral System Reform: What are the options?

**Dr. André Blais
Department of Political Science
Université de Montréal**

Introduction

There are many reform options, because electoral systems are multi-dimensional. There are three basic dimensions: 1. the constituency structure; 2. the ballot structure; 3. the electoral formula. And there many different ways of combining the various options for each of these three dimensions.

The debate usually focuses on the electoral formula but in my view each dimension is equally important. In order to understand how an electoral system works, one must understand: 1, what seats are to be allocated?; 2, how people vote?; 3, how votes and seats are to be linked, that is, how votes are to be counted in order to sort out who is elected. It is impossible to make sense of an electoral system without combining these three dimensions.

I will briefly review each dimension, indicate the basic options, and point out the major arguments for and against.

The constituency

The first dimension concerns the constituency. There are three questions to be addressed: 1. Will there be districts or not?; 2. (if there are districts) Will the districts be single-member or multi-member?; (if multi-member districts) How large will the districts be (5 seats, 10 seats, 20 seats)?

A number of observations can be made about the constituency structure. On the one hand, no one in Canada has proposed that the whole province or country be one single district. The option of one single district is not on the agenda. On the other hand, no one is proposing multi-member plurality or majority. The choice is between single-member plurality and multi-member PR.

The basic case for single-member constituencies is that one individual MP is held directly responsible for defending the interests of a specific small geographic area. The case for multi-member constituencies is that most voters get an MP from their party to represent them in their region.

The ballot

Three basic questions ought to be raised about the ballot. The first concerns the object of the vote: Are voters invited to express their views about the parties, the candidates, or both? The second pertains to the type of information that the vote is supposed to convey: Are voters invited to provide nominal or ordinal information? Ordinal information entails rank ordering the parties/candidates from most to least preferred. Nominal information consists in a yes/no response (I leave aside numerical information; with panachage, voters can give five votes to one candidate and two to another). The last question is about the number of votes the voter is allowed to cast: Are voters allowed to cast one vote or many? (if many) How many?

Some comments about the object of the vote. The basic case for the closed list ballot, in which voters are invited to vote for a party (and, implicitly, its list of candidates) is that it is parties that matter and that voters logically care first and foremost about parties. The case against the closed list is that voters also want to have a say about the individuals who will represent them.

It can be argued that there should be a division of labour in a democracy. Party members should select the candidate(s) who will run for the party and voters should decide how many seats (if any) each party gets. This suggests that voters will be more insistent about having a say about the candidates if and when they are skeptical about the functioning of party democracy.

I would argue that, everything else being equal, a system that allows voters to express their separate preferences about the parties and the candidates is preferable to one that does not allow them to do so, that a system that allows voters to rank order the parties/candidates (and thus to express not only their first but also their second and third preferences) is preferable to a system that does not allow them to do so, and that a system that allows many votes is preferable to a system with a single vote. The reason is simple. A system that allows voters to express their views about many objects, in different ways and nuances will convey more accurate information about voters' opinions. And more information is better than less. It should be pointed out that the existing system is information-poor. Voters have one vote, they cannot rank order the candidates and they cannot separately express their views about the candidates and the parties.

The only objection against an information-rich ballot is that it may be more complicated. I do not find such an objection compelling. Australian and Irish voters, for instance, are capable of rank ordering the candidates. I fail to see why Canadians would be less competent.

There is, however, one valid argument against two round systems. People do not want to vote too often. French voters in 2002 had to go to the polls four times within two months, for the two rounds of the presidential election and again for the two rounds of the legislative elections.

The formula

The basic options are: plurality (the party/candidate with most votes wins), majority (the party/ candidate with more than 50% of the vote wins), PR (seats are distributed on the basis of votes obtained), and mixed (a combination of PR and majority or plurality).

The basic debate in Canada is whether or not to have PR or some element of PR. It should be pointed out, however, that no system is completely proportional. There are degrees of proportionality. Some systems are not proportional at all, some are slightly proportional, others somewhat proportional and still others very proportional. The degree of proportionality depends very much on district magnitude. In order to have strong proportionality, it is necessary to have large districts (at least 10 seats) and this entails large regions, or to have two tiers, some small districts combined with corrective national seats, or a mixed corrective system as in Germany.

It is also quite possible to have a strong degree of proportionality and to let voters have a say about individual candidates through an open list, preferential voting, the single transferable vote, or a mixed system.

The basic difference between PR and SMP is that the former produces more parties, fairer representation of parties, and more multi-party coalition governments.

More parties means more choice for voters, which is clearly an advantage. It seems difficult to argue that more parties, as such, is a “bad” thing. It can be argued, however, that having more parties has negative indirect consequences, because it increases the odds of coalition governments (see below).

It is also difficult to argue that fairer representation is not a “good” thing. We could debate how important a criterion fairness is or should be, but, everything else being equal, we should prefer a fair to an unfair system.

The real debate is about the third difference, that is, about the virtues and vices of single-party versus multi-party (coalition) governments. It should be pointed out that SMP does not always produce single-party governments nor PR coalition governments. But there is a relatively close link. Coalition governments are much more frequent under PR.

There are two main arguments in favour of coalition governments. The first is that coalition governments tend to be more centrist. I do not find this entirely compelling. Under PR there is an incentive for parties to differentiate themselves during the campaign (and to be less centrist), and an incentive to make compromises (and to move to the center) in the course of negotiations over the formation of the government. These two trends are contradictory and probably cancel each other.

The second argument is that multi-party governments produce less centralized governments. They weaken the power of the Prime Minister: major decisions require the approval of coalition partners and cannot be as easily imposed. In my view, this is a valid point.

There are three main arguments in favour of single-party governments and against multi-party governments. The first is that coalition governments are unstable (the Italian syndrome). I do not find this argument very compelling. In fact, the durability of Canadian governments appears quite comparable to that observed in most PR countries. Furthermore, it is possible to protect against potential instability by establishing a threshold (or having small districts), so that there are not more than 5 or 6 parties in the legislature.

The second argument is that voters have no say in the composition of coalition governments, that they are the outcome of backroom negotiations. The political elite, not the voters, decides which parties form the government. The argument is partly valid. Yes, backroom negotiations are part of the game in PR systems and the parties can decide without direct input from the voters. But the voters can, *ex post* (at the next election), punish parties which formed coalitions that they oppose. And it is thus in the parties' interest to anticipate voters' reactions. So, the formation of coalitions is affected, at least partly, by public opinion.

The third argument is that responsibility is diluted in coalition governments. If voters are dissatisfied, it is not always clear which of the coalition partners should be blamed. It is an advantage of single-party governments that they contribute to clearer government responsibility.

The most likely reform options

In my view, the three most likely reform options in Canada are: 1. Open list PR (like Finland); 2. STV (like Ireland); 3. Mixed corrective (like Germany). This judgment is based on the assumption that any reform would have to incorporate some degree of proportionality and that Canadians want to have a say about the candidates (which excludes closed lists).

It is useful to point out what specifically distinguishes each option from the other two. Open list PR is the only system in which voters have only one vote. This can be construed as a disadvantage. STV is the only one which allows ordinal (rank order) voting, which is an advantage. But the system almost necessarily entails small districts, which reduces the proportionality of the system. Mixed corrective is the only option that retains single-member constituencies and that entails no intra-party competition during the election campaign (no candidate is competing with candidates of the same party). These two characteristics can be construed as advantages. But the mixed corrective system is also the only one that produces two types of MPs, some elected under one set of rules and others elected under another set. This can be viewed as a disadvantage.

Conclusion

The choice of an electoral system raises many questions. Among these:

1. How important is geographic representation? How important is socio-demographic (especially gender and ethnic) representation? Which is most important?
2. How important is clear responsibility?
3. How important are parties and local candidates?
4. How important is it to allow voters to express their views in all their nuances?
5. How important is fair representation of the various viewpoints in the legislature? How important is it that minority viewpoints be represented?
6. How important is it to have a Prime Minister who can act decisively and/or to prevent a centralization of political power around the Prime Minister's office?

The choice of an electoral system is very much about which values or objectives are more important and which are less crucial. It is impossible to achieve all these objectives. At the end, there has to be a decision about which considerations should be given top priority. And this is why, in my view, it should be up to the people to make the final decision.