

# Why is the Canadian Government Dysfunctional?

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## INTRODUCTION

Historically, Canadian citizens have looked down upon the Canadian government for several reasons. Reasons such as slow pace in legal change, weak international representation and lastly—the most important reason—a disproportional electoral system. This component is a crucial constituent to the Canadian government, which essentially ties it to the reason of democracy, making it the reason to why the government of Canada is known as democratic. Ideally, a democratic government has the obligation to its citizens that all their elections be ran in the fairest way possible. More so, making elections the essence of fairness by letting everyone contest and vote. This allows the primary function of elections to work along with citizens choosing their parliamentary representative and indirectly, their governmental leaders. In most cases, the Canadian government tends to respect and meet these standards (Dyck 200: 290). However, the Canadian electoral system has a reputation for consistently misrepresenting the Canadian public and has implications that deny the Canadians the right to have their vote count, making this a problem of proportionality and misrepresentation. Thus, these discrepancies in the

Canadian electoral system constitute the Canadian government and give reason to why the Canadian government is so dysfunctional.

This paper will examine the legal, and formal aspects of the Canadian electoral system, while arguing against the system and highlighting the flaws in present electoral system. It will start by explaining how the existing system works in detail by showing electoral behaviours, briefly touching upon historical context, and how Canada adopted this present system. Next, we will focus on three main representation and proportionality issues this system associates with. After pointing out its flaws, and why these flaws cannot be fixed even with public opinion, it will switch onto solutions and or remedies that the Canadian electoral system can take on or use to enhance the elections. Lastly, this paper will conclude by showcasing why these discrepancies can cause harm to the present system and how, as a result of these issues, the Canadian government can be deemed as very dysfunctional.

## **I.HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

The Canadian plurality electoral system is often referred to as “first past the post,” which is one of the crucial components that make up the pillars of a country’s institutional framework. This system was adopted from Great Britain, being one of the first past the post system. More so, Canadian adoption was through the interment of history due to the fact that they were a part of the British colonies. In the pre-Confederation elections, Canadians initially adopted this system starting with Nova Scotia in 1758 (Seidle, 2002). This system ruled and governed federal, provincial, and territorial elections for majority of Canadian history, accept for some provinces that used alternative electing methods, such as Manitoba. However, the plurality rule was applied

in a number of different dual member constituencies, both provincially and federally (Qualter, 1970: 118-21). Nevertheless, plurality was slowly changing and a new system was starting to fall in place, and in the 1960's single-member plurality hit the stage and is now used throughout Canada (Seidle, 2002). Both systems involve the simple voter-ballot electing system, where citizens vote for who they want to elect to acquire a seat in the House of Commons, and the most seats accounts for the most influence. But conversely, this new system was not perfect and still falling into question, causing it to highlight many of its flaws that should be reformed.

## **II. CRITICISMS OF THE SYSTEM**

Misrepresentation of individuals is highly prevalent under the current Canadian electoral system, most evidentially towards women. Despite efforts by most major political parties (Young, 2000: Chap. 5), women are abruptly under-represented in the House of Commons. In the 2000 election, 21 percent of MPs (members of parliament) were women, which is a misrepresentation of the female gender in the Canadian community. Many feminist such as the former president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, Judy Rebick says, "it should be a scandal of major proportions that after 30 years of feminism only 20 percent of the members of the House of Commons are women" (Seidle, 2002). This suggests that women should increase their numbers in the House of Commons. However, this assumption that if the number of women increase than women will be better represented, is wrong. Primarily research has shown that, the majority of women in national legislatures are lower under single-member plurality than dual/multi- member systems (Young, 1994: 4-5). Lastly, because of the decrease in number of Canadian government votes by women, it is consequently leading to a decrease in public participation, which results in a dysfunctional society.

Although misrepresentation is present under the current Canadian electoral system, academics are divided on the issue of women. Some academics are skeptical on the issue of whether a women's presence in legislation is needed (Seidle, 2002). Ideally in their perspective, a narrow focus on women's presence in legislatures brings out a question of capacity. They question whether a woman has the capacity to "exercise significant influence when party discipline remains so strong and stress the significance of their being appointed to positions of power, such as Cabinet" (Arseneau, 1999: 144). However, other academics find that there is valuable evidence that indicates the correlation between voter turnout rate and equality. Henry Milner (2002: 89) observes that voters would be better educated if they would have a "clearer, more complete political map" that is associated with proportional representation. Primarily, turnout is higher in countries that use a form of proportional representation (Franklin, 1996: 226-227). Studies also claim that proportional representation would provide additional incentives to civilian to engage in electoral participation by abolishing "wasted votes" while making elections much more interesting and competitive in nature. "[s]ince the relative standing of the parties in the House of Commons would more closely reflect their level of popular support, the political system would appear more responsive" (CRIC, 2001: 36).

Another issue is that single-member plurality tend to work against smaller political parties. This is resulted because of the variety of voices heard are too restricted. Consequently, because those who support the smaller parties that do not have a chance of winning, never get to be heard (Beatty, 2001: 52). The chance that a smaller party such as the Greens attaining a seat is slim to none, leading to no representation. In sum, because the single-member plurality does not provide the power of voting and effective representation, it decreases the number of votes in an electoral system (Knight, 1999). In addition, it leads to citizens questioning whether they should

even vote or not. Furthermore, this led to the decrease in voter turnout rate in the 2000 federal elections. This downwards slump consisted of only 61 percent voter turnout (Canada, Chief Electoral Officer, 2001: Table 4), which again begs another question: “why should people bother to show up and vote if they are among the majority of voters whose ballot does not produce any effective result?” (Mendelsohn, 2001; Milner, 1999: 40) Thus, citizens weren’t voting if they were minority or if they were majority, which caused the government to become dysfunctional.

Some may suggest that another issue is that there is a huge inconsistency between number of seats and number of votes a certain party receives. More so, there is an over-representation of the governing party and the under-representation of most opposition parties (Loenen, 1997: 146). For example, Bloc Québécois (BQ) are often overrepresented, while parties such as PCs receive 19 percent of the popular vote in 1997 but had only seven percent of the seats 20 MPs. This huge disproportionality in the votes give another reason why people do not vote and how this dysfunctional system does not represent the Canadian voices as a whole. Furthermore, the parliamentary representation of Quebec and the West, is well above their share of the nation-wide vote—shown through the BQ becoming the official opposition in 1993 with 54 MPs and 14 percent of the popular vote (Seidle, 2002). While the PCs and the New Democratic party (NDP), with their national focus, have been historically under-represented, reflecting their vote shares. Consequently, the Progressive Conservatives (PCs) have received 19 percent of the popular vote in 1997 but had only seven percent of the seats, respectfully only 20 MPs (Seidle, 2002).

Complementary, to the under and over-representation of governing parties causing a decrease in voter turnout rate, it additionally adds to the power of the executive, predominantly the Prime Minister (Loenen, 1997: 146; Gibson, 2002: 25). Richard Johnston (2001:14),

advocates that the PR would impose parliamentary coalition building, which essentially suggest that “the Liberals would not be the only, or even the dominant party in government” (Johnston, 2001: 14). However agreeable Johnston’s statement is, many commentators often attribute too much influence to the electoral system, when discussing the issue of executive power, thus, showing that the neglect of several factors that contribute to the issue of misrepresentation should be publicized (Seidle, 2002).

Despite the evident support Canadian citizens have regarding these inconsistencies, public opinion is not motivating the debate on electoral system reform. Nevertheless, the Institute for Research on Public Policy conducted a survey in 2000, where 49 percent of respondents refuted in regards to our present election system. Respondents claimed that, “under our present election system, a party can win a majority of the seats and form the government without winning a majority of the votes” (Howe and Northrup, 2000: 13). At the same time, 71 percent believed that the electoral system should produce productive majority governments. However, even though public opinion is strongly against the current electoral system, surveys have shown that respondents also pertain a low level of understand electoral rules. “47 percent thought political parties must win a majority of all votes in order to form the government” (Bricker and Redfern, 2001: 22-23). Fundamentally, this shows why public opinion is discredited and does not fuel the debate on electoral system, causing difficulties to reform. The government will not and should not listen to voices that do not understand the dynamics. In latter, if Canadians want the dysfunctional system of the government to change, then instead of pushing fort change through public opinion, they should educate themselves regarding alternative electoral systems.

### **III. SOLUTIONS**

There are two solutions that a number researchers have come up with: the mixed electoral system and the Australian alternative vote system (Seidle, 2002). The mixed electoral system will be proposed in two ways. First, the way of Kent Weaver in 1997, then Bryan Schwartz in 2001. Generally, Kent Weaver's mixed system was tied to the compensation of seats equaling to 10 percent of the House of Commons (Seidle, 2002). This 10 percent is added to the existing constituencies, so that it would decrease distortions from parties. In addition, Kent ran a simulation from 1965 to 1997 where he found an interesting fact: if the simulations were ran on the 2000 elections, the Liberals would have kept a safe majority (Seidle, 2002). Ideally, he feels this new model "makes the party system less regionalized, giving the biggest parties seats where they are relatively weak" (Seidle, 2002). The Bryan Schwartz mixed system was created by Schwartz's idea that his model would improve seat/vote ration by having 80 percent of House of Commons seats be elected by Single-member plurality and 20 percent be allocated to parties by regional vote shares for the SMP seats. Ultimately, this lead to him finding out that four of the eight majority governments would be turned to minorities (Schwartz 2001: 152-153). This system therefore allows both a regional (i.e. constituency) representation, and party representation while making sure each party is proportionally represented.

Secondly, the Australian alternative vote system allows all constituencies to remain as is and be represented by a single person. However, voters would indicate not just their first choice, but their second, third, etc. (Courtney, 1999: 10). This ensures that the winning candidates have majority of votes. Some believe that the Australian alternative vote system would create incentives for Canadian Alliance and the PCs to forge an electoral alliance. Thus, creating a stronger voice for Canadians to be heard under.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Evidently, there are many clear difficulties and obstacles to take when trying to change the Canadian electoral system. One of the biggest obstacles is that the political party in charge would never change or have an interest in changing the system, given that that system is in their favour. However, in order to change Canada's dysfunctional government, Canada must change its electoral system. If this continues, Canada will have decreasing numbers in voter turnout rate, leading to a decrease in public participation, and thus creating a bad relationship between the public and the government. Nevertheless, this push for potential change can become difficult when the government is aware of the fact that Canadians do not understand the dynamics of electoral reforms. Additionally suggesting, that just by voice public opinion alone cannot fuel electoral reform. Individuals must step up and educate themselves on potential alternatives such as the mixed electoral system and the Australian alternative vote system. And if they do not, these discrepancies, such as women's representation, access to legislative representation, equality of voting power, and inconsistency between seats and votes will always exist, causing the Canadian electoral system to continue to put forth a dysfunctional Canadian government.

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