

BRIEFING NOTE: ELECTORAL REFORM

Background

Prime Minister Trudeau has asked his Minister of Democratic Institutions, Maryam Monsef (MP for Peterborough-Kawartha), to look into ways of changing our system, including preferential ballots (PB) and proportional representation (PR).

Trudeau has spoken in favour of preferential ballots. The NDP, Greens and most civil society groups advocate for some form of proportional representation.

Action on electoral reform is expected within 18 months so it is critical that we position ourselves as intervenors in the national conversation around this.

What follows is a brief review of the forms of electoral reform that are currently being talked about in Canada and some analysis of the pros and cons of each.

Recommendation:

CUPE should advocate for mixed-member proportional representation (MMP). This is the system of electoral reform that the NDP brought forward to Parliament in December 2014 as a priority motion on one of their Opposition Days. The motion was lost 166-110 but 16 Liberal MPs also voted in support of it.

First-past-the-post

Definition: the sole candidate in each constituency who receives the most votes is elected, regardless of the percentage. All other votes do not count.

Proponents: only the Conservatives

Arguments against:

- In 2011 and 2015, the Conservatives and Liberals respectively received 'false majorities' with only 39.5 % of the vote. In 2015, the Green party got 3.4 % of the vote, but only 0.3 % of the seats. In 2011, the NDP got 32 % of the vote in Saskatchewan, but did not elect any MPs.

- Parties often put up the most broadly acceptable candidates in each constituency, which often excludes minorities.

Arguments for:

- Simple to understand, local accountability and often produces stable majorities.

Proportional representation

Definition: Seats in Parliament are allocated proportional to the popular vote each party has received.

Mixed-member proportional representation (MMP) is a form of proportional representation. In order to make sure that voters still have a direct connection to an elected MP who represents their constituency, the idea is to simply add a number of seats, say 50 or 100, that would balance the numbers. Some MPs would be elected in their ridings, as they are today, and others would be appointed through predetermined party lists in order to even out the discrepancy between the proportions of votes and the seats.

Single Transferable Vote (STV) is another form of proportional representation where many candidates are elected in each (bigger) constituency – in this system, each voter gets to mark their ballot for a number of candidates.

New Zealand, Germany, Scotland and Wales have MMP, while Ireland, India and Australia's upper houses have STV. Most OECD countries have a form of PR.

Proponents:

Fair Vote Canada, Lead Now and the Council of Canadians have all made public statements in support of some form of proportional representation. The NDP and the Greens as well as some Liberals including Bob Rae and Stéphane Dion, have publicly supported Mixed-member proportional representation.

Arguments against MMP:

- Often leads to minority and coalition governments and is complicated;
- Allows for extremist parties to gain seats and influence in Parliament, though this can be averted with a minimum percentage for list 'top-ups';
- 'List' candidates - sometimes party insiders - aren't accountable to constituents.

Arguments for MMP:

- Every vote counts the same, which would likely increase voter turn-out;
- Would eliminate false majorities and regional party blocs (like the current 32 out of 32 Liberal MPs in the Atlantic);
- Systems can be shaped to increase representation of regions, minorities etc.;
- Less likely to have majority governments sweep in and make drastic changes;
- Encourages cross-party cooperation.

Preferential ballots

Definition: Also called ranked ballots or preferential voting, this allows voters to rank candidates according to preference. If no candidate receives 50% of the votes on the first round, then the candidate with the lowest votes is eliminated and the second place votes are counted on those ballots and added to the totals of remaining candidates. The process continues until someone receives 50%.

Proponents: Justin Trudeau (and a lot of other Liberals)

Most popular arguments against:

- This is not proportional representation – it is still a winner-takes-all system that does not make every vote count equally;
- Favours centrist parties (like the Liberals) who are often a second choice.

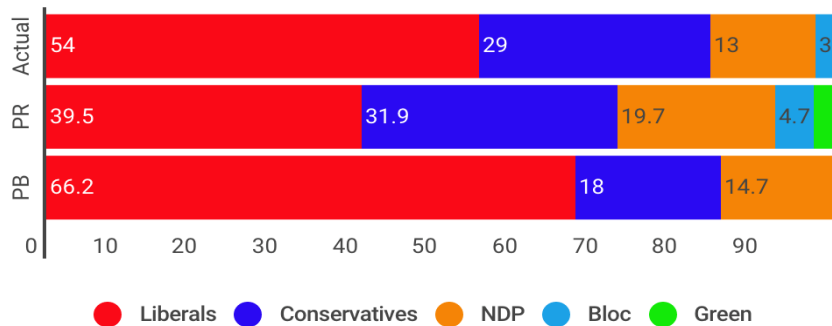
Most popular arguments for:

- Easy to implement and to understand.

Illustration

See below for 2015 results under preferential balloting (PB) and proportional representation (PR). The PB predictions are based on 2nd preference exit polling. The PR predictions are the raw percentages of the vote each party received.

Distribution of seats (%)



Assessment

The Liberals will be compelled to act quickly on electoral reform though they may try to get a reference from the Supreme Court or the Senate. They might even go through a referendum process – and such processes can be stacked in favour of one model or another.

Electoral reform has been proposed in three provinces (PEI, Ontario and BC), each time failing to pass a referendum. CUPE BC was very involved in opposing STV in 2009, on the grounds that the proposal was “overly complex and that there might be “loss of local access to elected officials” or that a “riding could be dominated by a small part of it.”

But the ground has shifted for progressives in Canada – the NDP is now publicly advocating for a more fair and proportional federal electoral system and supporting MMP. So are grassroots organizations such as Fair Vote Canada and the Council of Canadians.

Support for Mixed member proportional representation is consistent with the language adopted as part of Strategic Directions 2015-2017 – that commits CUPE to initiating an evaluation of potential electoral system reforms and promoting the “more representative form of proportional representation”. Support for MMP – and opposition to preferential ballots – is also consistent with CUPE BC's past opposition to STV.

Beyond the federal scene, we need to evaluate ranked balloting at the municipal level in provinces where there are no municipal party affiliations. The Province of Ontario has committed that it will provide municipalities with the option of using ranked ballots in future elections, starting in 2018, as an alternative to the current first-past-the-post system. The use of ranked ballots in municipalities might increase the very low voter turnout that we have often seen in the past in municipal elections.