Which Voting System is Best for Canada?

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Our voting system weakens Canada's cohesion. It artificially amplifies the regional concentration of political party support at the federal level. With 50% of the vote in a given province, a federal party could end up taking almost all the seats. But with 20% of the vote, it may end up not winning any seats at all. This is how Ontario appeared more Liberal than it really was, Alberta more Reform-Conservative, Quebec more Bloc, etc.

I do not see why we should maintain a voting system that makes our major parties appear less national and our regions more politically opposed than they really are. I no longer want a voting system that gives the impression that certain parties have given up on Quebec, or on the West. On the contrary, the whole spectrum of parties, from Greens to Conservatives, must embrace all the regions of Canada. In each region, they must covet and be able to obtain seats proportionate to their actual support. This is the main reason why I recommend replacing our voting system. The issue now is to come up with an alternative.

I propose the "proportional-preferential-personalized vote," or "P3" for short (not to be confused with P3 construction projects!).

We would elect three to five MPs per riding rather than one. The number of seats would remain the same; what would be reduced is the number of ridings. This would provide moderate proportional representation, which corrects the regional distortions of the current electoral system.

Indeed, the party that gets the most votes in a riding would probably win three seats out of five or two out of three. Thus, seats would be truly up for grabs in all ridings, even in the most Conservative ones in Alberta and the most Liberal ones in Toronto and Montreal.

However, using this moderate proportional voting system would be less likely to result in one-party majority governments. And should a coalition government prove necessary, it should be stable and coherent. One way to prepare parties to such eventualities would be to use preferential voting. Under this system, voters are invited, when casting their votes, to rank the parties in order of preference.

The great advantage of preferential voting is that it promotes cooperation among the parties. It is actually in each party's interest to persuade those who support other parties that it represents a second acceptable choice. The parties are thus encouraged to highlight similarities in their objectives and platforms.

By seeking out the transfer of subsequent voting preferences from their respective voters, parties would better prepare themselves to govern together. Thus, these coalitions would be predictable for voters, and even influenced by them, and, as a result, likely coherent.

Finally, voters should be allowed not only to rank parties by preference, but also to select a candidate. They would choose the candidate they prefer from among those put forward by the party they select as their top preference. In other words, voters would choose only one candidate in the party of their first choice. This would allow Canadians to continue voting for real live candidates, not just for parties. Hence, voting would remain personalized.

This is how the ballots would be counted. First, the voters' first party preferences would be counted. If one or more parties failed to obtain enough first choices to win a seat, the party that got the smallest number of votes would be eliminated and its voters' second choices would be transferred to the remaining parties. The second and subsequent choices of the eliminated parties would be allocated until all of the parties still in the running obtain at least one seat. This would produce the percentages of votes that determine the number of seats obtained by the various parties.

Then, the voters' choices as to their preferred candidate among those attached to their preferred party are counted. If a party obtained two seats, that party's two candidates who received the highest number of votes would win those two seats.

We would thus get a voting system that enhances our political parties' Canada-wide presence, reinforces the level of cooperation that should exist between parties, makes every vote count and ensures that there are seats truly at stake throughout Canada. P3 voting is a perfect fit for Canada, a great tool to promote cohesion in our vast, decentralized and diverse country.

INTRODUCTION

The voting system is the method used for translating votes into seats following an election. We are very familiar with the method used in Canada: the candidate with the most votes in a riding becomes the MP, and the party with a majority of MPs is invited to form a government. This is how a party with a majority of seats is able to form a majority government even if it did not receive a majority of votes.

This is called the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system. However, there are many other voting systems. In fact, ours is far from being the preferred method in other democracies. It can hardly be found anywhere except for the United States and the United Kingdom (but not in Scotland or Wales).

A voting system is more than just a way of tallying votes. It sets the ground rules that have a profound influence, for better or worse, on voters' choices, the behaviours of politicians and political parties, parliamentary proceedings and government operations.

Each voting system has its own strengths and weaknesses. Ours has its strengths as well. I am not one of those who view it as fundamentally undemocratic. However, I do argue that its weaknesses are such that it should be replaced with another system. Not just any one will do, though. Some would make the situation worse. For example, I would prefer to keep our voting system rather than adopt pure proportional representation. This one would simply not do, especially for a country like Canada.

After explaining why I believe in the need for a change and why this alternative should not be pure proportional representation, I will recommend a voting system that I believe would be best for Canada.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH THE FPTP SYSTEM?

In recent years, referendums to change the voting system were held in three provinces: Prince Edward Island, Ontario and British Columbia (twice). While our voting system survived these referendums, this was in part because those advocating for change were divided: they did not agree on the alternative. This was also because of a natural phenomenon: fear of change. However, this was also because many Canadians value some of the strengths of our voting system. I see three:

1. **Stability**. More than any other voting system, ours offers stability, if stability is defined as having a majority government, made up of a single party, able to govern for a full four-year term. We do know that our voting system can also produce minority governments, which are unstable and often short-lived. However, it does offer the highest probability of producing a majority, one-party government, since it is the only one that can grant the majority of seats to a party that receives less than 40% of the vote.

2. **Accountability**. The party forming the government for four years is accountable during its term; it must assume the consequences of its actions and its policies. It cannot place the responsibility for failures or shortcomings on coalition partners, since it governed alone. Voters are able to express a clear judgment on the governing party. A government can suffer severe consequences for disappointing voters, since although it is true that a party can form a government with 40% of the vote, it can also be reduced to a handful of MPs with 20% of the vote.

3. **Territoriality**. All MPs are linked to a specific geographic area, a riding where they were elected, to which they are accountable and on which they depend for their re-election.

I will now turn to the major problem with this voting system: the way it distorts the results between votes and seats. This distortion is often significant, creating enormous gaps between the number of seats won by the parties and the number of votes received. There are even times when the party that won the most seats and formed the government did not even receive the most votes. This has occurred in the provinces (three times in mine) and in the 1979 federal election.

This distortion effect is particularly difficult to accept when a majority government elected by a minority of voters forces the country on an ideological course that is contrary to the preferences of the majority.

Sometimes, this distortion effect ends up depriving the opposition parties of enough seats to be able to function properly. In one instance in New Brunswick, the opposition did not win a single seat!

However, for Canada, the main problem of this distortion effect is that it artificially amplifies the regional concentration of political party support at the federal level. With 50% of the vote in a given province, a federal party could end up taking almost all the seats. But with 20% of the vote, it may end up not winning any seats at all. This is how Ontario appeared more Liberal than it really was, Alberta more Reform-Conservative, Quebec more Bloc, etc.

This regional amplification effect benefits parties with regionally concentrated support and, conversely, penalizes parties whose support is spread across the country without dominating anywhere. A party able to reach out to voters across the country is disadvantaged compared to another whose base is only in one region.

My main concern with all this is national cohesiveness, even national unity. I do not see why we should maintain a voting system that makes our major parties appear less national than they are, favouring regional parties at the expense of national ones concerned with reconciling the regional interests of our vast country. This is the main reason why I recommend replacing our voting system.

The issue now is to come up with an alternative. We need one that corrects the weaknesses of the current system while still providing stability, accountability and territoriality. This alternative cannot be pure proportional representation.

2 WHAT IS WRONG WITH PURE PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION?

Let us suppose that Canada, instead of being divided into 308 ridings, was made up of only one, but with 308 MP seats to fill. Let's make it 300 to make it simpler. Each party would present a list of 300 candidates. Each party would obtain a percentage of MPs in keeping with the percentage of votes. For example, a party that wins 30% of the vote would be given 30% of the seats, or 90 seats. The first 90 names on its list would form its caucus of MPs. A party that wins 20% of the vote would be given 60 seats. A party would be entitled to three seats with 1% of the vote.

Canada would then elect its House of Commons based on a voting system called pure proportional representation, which matches votes to seats for all parties. Its strength is exactly how it eliminates the distortion between votes and seats. The make-up of Parliament would then reflect voter preferences.

Proportional representation is seen to have two other advantages. One is that it encourages voter turnout. The reason for this higher turnout is that with proportional representation, each vote counts; there are no longer any safe ridings where voters are not as interested in voting because they have the impression that the results have already been decided and that a voter's preferred candidate is guaranteed to win or lose. However, the effect of proportional representation on voter turnout – a 2% to 5% increase according to experts – is not enough to reverse the current trend of decreasing voter turnout in democracies.

Another advantage of proportional representation is that it would also mean electing a greater number of women and minorities. Parties are encouraged to place some women and minorities near the top of their lists. They do this in part because most of them have egalitarian values, but also in order to woo these voters.

Pure proportional representation therefore provides undeniable advantages. However, it has been rejected by almost all democracies. It is found only in Israel and the Netherlands. What exactly is wrong with it? There are essentially three problems.

First, it tends to create a lot of political instability by greatly increasing the number of parties represented in Parliament. It then becomes impossible to form a government other than through unstable, shifting coalitions. This would likely throw the country into an almost uninterrupted election campaign. And when this chronic instability is avoided through deals struck between parties, this likely comes at the price of paralysis and the inability to make tough decisions.

Second, during negotiations between parties in order to form the government, small ideological factions can negotiate a level of influence in the government that is disproportionate to their electoral representativeness. This is a problem in Israel, where small orthodox religious parties gain influence in coalition governments. In other words, pure proportional representation tends to produce a parliament that reflects voter preferences and a government that strays from them.

Third, there is no more territoriality. Voters lose "their" MP and "their" riding. They vote only for party lists.

This is why democracies prefer to engage in moderate as opposed to pure proportional representation. Moderation can be obtained in a number of ways. One is through a mixed system: have parliament elected partly by FPTP and partly by proportional representation, as in Japan.

There can also be a threshold, a minimum percentage of votes, that a party must reach before its MPs can be elected. This limits the number of parties represented in parliament, which reduces the risk of instability. This threshold varies by country: 5% in Germany, 7% in Poland, 10% in Turkey.

Another frequently used method involves electing several MPs per riding. For example, in a riding where ten seats are up for election, a party that receives 50% of the vote would have five seats, a party that receives 30% of the vote would have three seats, etc. Under such a system, in most cases there are not enough seats to be given to parties that receive few votes. This then produces moderate proportional representation. This also ensures that all MPs have a home territory, even if none of them have a riding to themselves.

As we can see, there are various ways to correct the weaknesses of pure proportional representation. Countries adopt these various methods, sometimes changing from one to another, sometimes reinventing them, so as to elect their politicians in a way that fits their own characteristics. Let us now take a look at Canada: which voting system would be the most appropriate?

3 THE CANADIAN CONTEXT MUST BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT

Canada is a decentralized federation made up of 14 governments (including the territories). Such a country must have a parliament and federal government able to act quickly and efficiently without being hampered by shifting, unstable coalitions. It is not always necessary for the government to be formed by a single party, but if it is made up of a coalition, it needs to be viable, formed by only a few (two or three) well-constituted parties with strong national foundations.

Canada is a diverse country. So in the interest of national cohesion, it is preferable that national parties not be at a disadvantage compared to those with most of their support lying in a single region.

This decentralized, diverse country needs a party system that reflects its political diversity, while at the same time encouraging the various parties to cooperate for the common good, beyond their differences. We need competition and cooperation, rather than confrontation and antagonism.

Canada is the size of a continent. Towns and cities are often vast distances apart. Ottawa is often very far away. To paraphrase Mackenzie King, Canada has little history but a lot of geography. This is why all MPs must have a home territory, a riding they need to look after. Voters must be able to vote for a real live candidate, in flesh and blood, not for long lists of candidates selected by the parties.

Of all the democracies, Canada's Parliament is one where women are not as well represented as they should be. We need a voting system that helps correct this under-representation and promotes adequate minority representation.

Like so many other democracies, Canada has seen a drop in voter participation in the last few years. A new voting system is required to help us curb this rise in abstentions.

Lastly, relative to its population, Canada already has a lot of MPs: 308 today, 338 in the next election. It would be better to choose a voting system that does not require us to increase this number.

Based on our country's unique characteristics, it can be said that the voting system adopted by the Liberal Party of Canada at its biennial convention in January 2012 is a step in the right direction but does not go far enough.

The Liberal delegates agreed to amend the FPTP voting system by adding preferential voting (also called "alternative voting"). Under this system, voters enter the polling booth and rank the candidates in order of preference. Voters are not required to rank them all: if there are 12 candidates, voters may simply choose to rank the 3 or 4 who interest them.

After the first preferences are counted, if a candidate receives more than 50% of the vote, he or she becomes the MP for the riding. However, if no candidate receives the majority of votes, then the candidate with the fewest number of votes is eliminated and the second preferences of the voters who selected that candidate are transferred to the other candidates. This process is repeated until one candidate receives a majority of the vote. This ensures that all MPs across the country receive the support of a majority of the voters in their ridings.

This system offers three major advantages. The first is that it increases the chances that the party which comes out on top is not too far from the preferences of voters who chose other parties.

The second is that it promotes cooperation among the parties. It is actually in each party's interest to persuade those who support other parties that it represents a second acceptable choice. The parties are thus encouraged to work together prior to elections, to highlight similarities in their objectives and platforms and to show mutual respect between leaders and their candidates. Competition remains lively but less likely to degenerate into unproductive antagonism and negative attacks.

The third advantage is that this system can encourage voter turnout. Even those voters whose favoured party is unlikely to win can hope to influence the final result by registering their second and third choices.

Preferential voting is a step in the right direction. However, it does nothing to correct the distortion between votes and seats and the under-representation of national parties compared to regional ones. Other changes are needed to find a voting system that best fits the Canadian context.

4 A VOTING SYSTEM FOR CANADA

In order to obtain a voting system that best fits Canada's needs, I propose a system based on a combination of moderate proportional representation, some elements of preferential vote and the retention of personalized vote. This new system can be achieved through three changes to our existing voting system.

The first change would be to elect three to five MPs per riding rather than one. This would provide moderate proportional representation, which corrects partisan and regional distortions.

The number of seats would remain the same; what would be reduced is the number of ridings. Just like today, the number of MPs would be what gives political weight to a province or a region.

Why three-five-MP ridings? Because a higher number than five MPs by riding would result in very large ridings in Canada, and a smaller number than three would not provide enough proportionality. There would, of course, be exceptions. The three Northern territories would remain one-seat ridings, since that is the only practical solution given their immense size and small populations.

The second change would be to allow voters, should they wish to do so, to rank parties according to their preferences rather than just vote for their preferred party. Their second and subsequent choices would be taken into account if their preferred party is eliminated because it did not get enough votes to earn a seat. The second choices of those who voted for the seatless party that has received the smallest number of votes would be transferred to the other parties and this would continue until each of the parties still in the running get at least one of the 5 (or 3) seats available for the riding. This way, every vote counts: by expressing their second and subsequent choices, those voters who see their preferred party eliminated can still influence the allocation of seats in their riding.

The third change would be to allow voters not only to rank parties by preference, but also to select a candidate. They would choose the candidate they prefer from among those put forward by the party they select as their top preference. In other words, voters would choose only one candidate in the party of their first choice. This would allow Canadians to continue to vote for real live candidates, not just for parties.

This is how the ballots would be counted. First, the voters' first party preferences would be counted. If one or more parties failed to obtain enough first choices to win a seat, the party that got the smallest number of votes would be eliminated and its voters' second choices would be transferred to the remaining parties. The second and subsequent choices of the eliminating parties would be allocated until all of the parties still in the running obtain a least one seat. This produces the percentages of votes determining the number of seats obtained by the various parties.

Then, the voters' choices as to their preferred candidate among those attached to their preferred party are counted. If a party obtains two seats, that party's two candidates who received the highest number of votes would win those two seats.

This provides a voting system that combines three principles: the proportional distribution of seats among the parties, an expression of voters' multiple preferences, and the personalized selection of MPs by the voters. When placed alongside each other, these three principles give this voting system the name "proportional-preferential-personalized vote," or "P3" for short (not to be confused with P3 construction projects!).

What would happen under such a system? It would produce a fairly meaningful proportional representation that greatly reduces the distortion between votes and seats as well as regional amplification, but at the same time is moderate enough to avoid a proliferation of parties and retain the possibility of a majority government formed by a single party. Coalition governments, when necessary, would probably be stable governments formed by two or three national parties, with support spread throughout the country, which would have prepared themselves to govern together by seeking out the transfer of subsequent voting preferences from their respective voters. These coalitions would be predictable for, and even influenced by voters, and, as a result, likely coherent.

Parliament would be made up of MPs who would all have a home base, even if they would no longer have a monopoly in a riding. This parliament would likely be more representative of women and cultural diversity, as the parties would have an incentive to diversify their offering of candidates in each riding.

Voter turnout might be higher than with the present voting system because voters of all political persuasions could hope to influence the allocation of seats everywhere in Canada, either with their first or subsequent choices.

This would be a customized voting system for Canada, a set of ground rules that fit the characteristics and needs for cohesion of a vast, decentralized and diverse country.

Does this voting system present disadvantages? Four come to mind, although they all appear to be questionable or of limited impact.

First, this new system of voting will appear complicated at first, although it is not more so than most of the other voting systems in place around the world. Admittedly, this may hinder adoption of this voting system. But once initial resistance is overcome, it would not be overly difficult to make it work. Sure, from a technical standpoint, vote counting would become more complex, with a greater number of recounts. However, Elections Canada has the ability to deal with this.

I believe that Canadian voters would very quickly appreciate how much more of a say they would have in the political system. They would be able to rank the parties according to their preferences. They would be able to select their preferred candidate in their preferred party. Once the election is over, they will be able to deal with the MP of their choice in their riding, instead of having only one as is the case now.

In fact, this argument can be turned on its head: the proportional-preferential-personalized voting system will make the job of voters easier, since they would then be able to vote their true preferences instead of juggling random strategic calculations. They would no longer have to wonder whether they should abandon voting for Party A and instead vote for Party B in order to block Party C. They would simply rank these parties according to their preferences.

Second, ridings are going to grow in size. Many communities will find that hard to accept. But we are used to dealing with this problem because we already have large ridings with the present system. Thanks to modern information and communications tools, MPs are much more efficient than in the past. The number of MPs will rise concomitantly: five MPs if the riding is five times more populous, three if it is three times more populous. Furthermore, these MPs will be competing with one another constantly, a good incentive for them to work even harder for their constituents.

Today, voters are helpless when they are stuck for four years with a lazy, incompetent or absent MP. In the new system, constituents would be able to deal with another elected official. Competition among the five MPs in a single riding would provide Canadians with better territorial representation.

Third, the probability that the government would be formed by a single party would be lower. But the probability of a stable government would remain the same, since the ground rules would encourage the parties to prepare for the possibility of governing together. It is even possible that there would be longer periods between federal elections since short-lived minority governments would probably occur less frequently.

Fourth, candidates of the same party would compete for seats. That could undermine cohesion in our parties. But it is very important to recognize that these new kinds of competitors must at the same time form a team, since they will have to demonstrate cohesion, without which their party would have difficulty rallying the number of votes needed to obtain seats. Those parties best able to combine cohesion and internal competition will have the best chances of winning, for the greater benefit of Canadians.

CONCLUSION:
A VOTING SYSTEM
FOR CANADIANS

Precedent makes holding a referendum necessary in Canada: changing the voting system would require popular support. To get this support, Canadians must be presented with a voting system that provides them with better influence over the political system.

While all attempts to date to amend the voting system in Canada have failed, despite numerous presentations, submissions, conferences and a couple of referendums, it appears that this may be the result of two related causes.

First, those advocating for change were too harsh in their attack against the current voting system. If we try to convince Canadians that they do not live in a "true" democracy, they will reject the proposal as being excessive or baseless. They are proud, and rightly so, of the democracy handed down to them by their forebears and by history. However, if it can be shown that their democracy could be improved by eliminating the weaknesses they are already familiar with, they will be more receptive.

Second, the alternatives already proposed were seen by most Canadians as not providing them with any benefits or as dry formulas of interest only to political scientists, dividing even those advocating for change.

The main assumption behind my current proposal, which makes it different from all previous ones, is that Canadians will agree to adopt a new voting system if they feel and understand that it was designed in a way that gives them a greater say over who governs them and how they do it. They will also appreciate a voting system customized for Canada, a vast, diverse, decentralized, bilingual, multicultural country of which Canadians are proud.

Canadians do not want to be taken for granted. In order for all votes to count, seats must be truly up for grabs in all ridings, even in the most Conservative of ridings in Alberta, even in the most Liberal of ridings in Toronto and Montreal.

Canadians are fed up with hearing politicians talk about doing politics differently and then continuing to do it the same way. They want competition to remain healthy but also be more respectful. They want election campaigns to be more focussed on substantive issues rather than on personal attacks. Once the election is over, they want to see parties cooperate in the country's common interest, and they want this cooperation to reflect this country's great diversity.

The P3 voting system does not guarantee any of this, but it does increase the chances of us getting closer to this ideal. In order for politicians to truly change their behaviour, changes need to be made to the voting rules. P3 would change them for the better. I may not have come up with the best formula, and I do keep an open mind. However, it is in this spirit that we need to work to improve our democracy.

In closing, I wish to speak as a Quebecker, although what I will be saying is, at least in part, valid for all other parts of Canada. I want a federal voting system that fully honours Quebec's rich political culture, of which we are rightfully proud.

Yes, there are Quebeckers who wish for independence, and as long as there are enough of them to elect MPs, they must be fairly represented in the House of Commons. But it does not do anybody any good if they are overrepresented. During all the years that the Bloc dominated Quebec's representation in the House of Commons, they never received a majority of votes from Quebec.

And yes, there are many Quebeckers with liberal or social-democratic leanings. But Quebec's political culture does not boil down to just that. There are also Conservatives in Quebec, traditionally "blue," particularly in the regions, who are entitled to be heard. Despite my Liberal allegiance, I am convinced that the general interest requires that Quebec's Conservatives be able to make their full contribution to the building of Canada alongside Conservatives from elsewhere in Canada.

I no longer want a voting system that gives the impression that certain parties have given up on Quebec. On the contrary, the entire spectrum of parties, from the Green Party to the Conservative Party, need to be able to take root, compete and win seats, so that they all take on a Quebec dimension.

This way, Quebeckers of every political stripe can join all other Canadians in laying a path for a better Canada. One way to achieve this is to adopt a new voting system, proportional-preferential-personalized vote, P3, made for Canada, for Canadians.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I take sole responsibility for the views expressed in this text. It is being published with Liberal Leader Bob Rae's consent but in no way does it constitute the Liberal Party of Canada's position. My hope is that the LPC, and all other political parties on Canada's federal scene, will one day adopt these views, if not the proposition that I submit for discussion.

Although the text is my sole responsibility, it owes much to the many Canadians, from every region and political allegiance, who provided their advice, encouraged me to put pen to paper and most importantly, expressed their hope that we can one day improve our democracy by reforming the voting system we use to elect our Members of Parliament.

I am also indebted to the many experts, in Canada and elsewhere, whose works I have read and whom I have consulted over the years, notably Professors André Blais (Université de Montréal), Ken Carty (University of British Columbia), Jean-Pierre Derriennic and Louis Massicotte (both from Université Laval).

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This text does not represent the position of *The Federal Idea*. By publishing this piece, our aim is to open the debate on this fundamental issue for our democracy. We invite both political parties and interested individuals to join the debate in sharing their comments and reactions.