

Canadians need ground rules for electoral reform debate

Unfair: While it's true that every adult citizen can vote in Canada, it is demonstrably not the case that every vote counts equally



Andrew Coyne

The great electoral reform debate is scarcely underway, and already it's in serious danger of running off the rails.

Something about the topic seems to bring out the irrational in people.

The status quo is described in terms that bear only the faintest resemblance to its actual workings, while any proposed reform, where it's not extravagantly caricatured, is treated as if it were the first time it had ever been tried anywhere.

Let us resolve, then, as a starting point, to deal with the systems as they actually exist, in Canada and in the many dozens of countries around the world that use a different system.

If there are hazards lurking in, say, proportional representation, let them be identified in the actual experience of the many places that use it, from Sweden to the Netherlands to New Zealand, not in vague jeremiads about what "could" happen or the absurdly unrepresentative examples of Israel or Italy.

Likewise, let us, in discussing potential reforms, stick to models that have any practical likelihood of being adopted. In particular, those who are concerned to preserve the principle of local representation should be assured here and now: there is exactly zero possibility of any system that didn't do so even being proposed in a country as vast as this, let alone passed into law. It's the very definition of a red herring.

A still greater problem, if the early debates are any indication, is the tendency of both sides to talk past each other, without common terms of reference. It is not possible to disagree with someone, in any intelligible sense, until you have agreed on some benchmark against which to measure the truth or falsehood of your respective positions.



When it comes to potential electoral reform, columnist Andrew Coyne writes, we should compare the systems as they exist.

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Absent that first step, it is as if the two sides are speaking different languages. Thus, to the objection of the reform camp, that the present system regularly results in "majority" governments being elected with less than 40 per cent of the vote, its defenders respond: exactly! That's not a bug, that's a feature!

Presumably all would say they believe in democracy. But it seems we have differing ideas about how to describe it, or what are its essential features. I might have thought we could agree it meant rule by the majority, but very well: if not that, is there some other principle we might agree on?

How about this? In a democracy, each person's vote should count for as much as every other. This strikes me as one of the core promises of democracy. Universal adult suffrage — "one person, one vote" — is a foundational principle of every modern democratic state. And yet, while it's true that every adult citizen can vote in Canada, it is

demonstrably not the case that every vote counts equally.

Leave aside the vast and unconscionable discrepancies in size that persist between different ridings: between the 20,000 or fewer electors in some ridings in Atlantic Canada or the North, and the nearly 100,000 in some ridings in Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia. But notice what that means: effectively, residents of the former ridings have five times the voting power as those of the latter. Their votes are worth five times as much.

The point to note here is that same discrepancy is observed in other respects; not just between voters in different ridings, but between voters for different parties.

For example, it took roughly 38,000 votes to elect each Liberal MP in the last election. By contrast, it took 57,000 votes to elect each Conservative, 79,000 to elect each New Democrat, and 82,000 to elect each member of the Bloc Québécois.

And of course, the nearly

603,000 people who voted Green were rewarded with exactly one seat.

And this was one of the less distorted recent results! In the 1993 election, you'll recall, the Conservatives, with 16 per cent of the vote, were reduced to a humiliating two seats. Meanwhile, the Bloc surged to 54 seats on the strength of ... 13.5 per cent of the vote, while the Reform Party, with less than 19 per cent of the vote, got 51 seats.

The issue here isn't fairness among the parties. Rather, it's the unequal treatment of different voters that represents a fundamental breach of the democratic promise.

Notice also the source of that inequity. The present system rewards parties that can bunch their votes geographically, compared to parties whose support is more evenly distributed, since only the party with the most votes in each riding is represented. So, parties that take an aggressively regional approach to politics — as Reform and the Bloc did — benefit disproportionately, at the expense of parties with a broader national outlook.

Even national parties will find themselves shut out of particular regions, or dominating others, out of all proportion to their actual support in either. The Liberals took all of the seats in Atlantic Canada this time, with less than 60 per cent of the vote. Similarly, in elections past the Liberals would commonly take nearly all of the seats in Quebec, while the Conservatives won nearly all of the seats in the West.

Canada is divided enough as it is, without the electoral system pouring salt in the wounds.

Defenders of the present system like to ask: what is the problem reform is supposed to solve?

There are a couple, for starters. I'll turn to some others in another column.