



Parliamentary Book Shelf

John Courtney, *Elections, The Canadian Democratic Audit Series*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004).

In John Courtney's audit of Canadian elections there is much praise for the status quo and only caution about embracing any reforms. Aside from some criticisms of the new voter registration system, Courtney – rightly – draws attention to the many strengths of the Canadian electoral system, particularly our system of independent boundary commissions and non-partisan democratic administration. Indeed, he even declares near the end of the book that “unlike countless millions around the world, Canadians today can take pride in their electoral regime.” For those unhappy with the workings of some of our electoral machinery, especially our traditional voting system, Courtney argues that while some problems may exist, they can not be helped – the greater good is served by the existing arrangements and their tendency to encourage ‘centrist, big tent’ parties and majority governments. But Courtney's arguments are based on some contentious interpretations of the Canadian party system and the nature of democracy. Depending on how one understands these debates, Courtney's conclusions will appear either more or less compelling.

To grasp the state of Canadian elections, Courtney explores what he calls the principal components or ‘building blocks’ of the electoral system. These include concerns over defining the franchise, revising electoral boundaries, administering the elections, registering voters, and the method of translating votes into seats. Utilizing the benchmarks es-

tablished by the Canadian Democratic Audit team, Courtney then evaluates each component of the electoral system in terms of how well it fosters participation, inclusiveness and responsiveness. On the whole, he finds most do so quite well, with Canadian democratic administration, boundary revision, and the scope of the franchise getting top marks, while only our current voter registration system comes in for sustained criticism.

Given the Democratic Audit criteria, one might have expected our current plurality voting system to come in for some criticism. After all, a host of critics have underlined how it fails to include all voices or register voter preferences accurately, thus limiting accountability and possibly depressing participation. But in discussing the voting system Courtney drops the Democratic Audit benchmarks altogether and introduces a different set of criteria concerned with maintaining the stability of government and the party system. Basically, Courtney argues that our single member plurality voting system has typically encouraged the formation of “broadly-based, nationally accommodative parties” that offer voters a clear choice between government and opposition. Though some parties may be discriminated against, Courtney feels this is an acceptable trade-off to maintain the brokerage function of our traditional party system that he feels is crucial to health of a country divided by language, region, ethnicity, etc. Furthermore, he argues that

alternatives like proportional representation would only lead to unstable minority or coalition government, party fragmentation, and a lack of governing and local accountability. These latter points are key because for Courtney, following Schumpeter, democracy is primarily about choosing a government, preferably one with a strong legislative majority. In Courtney's view, anything less in the Canadian setting would pose a threat to the maintenance of the country itself.

Not surprisingly, the strength of *Elections* as a volume tends to be concentrated in Courtney's own areas of research: redistricting processes, voter registration and democratic administration. As the bibliography makes clear, his nearly four decades of work in these areas helps explain his effortless command of these subjects. The chapters here on voter registration and redistricting are excellent introductions to these complex topics. Courtney's handling of the party system and questions of voting system effects, on the other hand, appear more controversial and, frankly, out-of-date. Even if one were to accept Courtney's rather benign characterization of the brokerage model – and there is considerable debate on that score – it should be clear that such a model is no longer in force today and has not been for some time. Trudeau, Mulroney and Chrétien all failed to broker, despite enjoying solid majority governments. And just as Cairns predicted, it is the plurality

system that has systematically distorted the divisive tensions in the country, particularly with the 1993 federal election results. Ironically, the very things that Courtney fears would come with a proportional voting system – that it would prevent accommodation and compromise, weaken accountability between voters and parties/government, and encourage parties to give up campaigning in weak areas – are, in fact, regular features of our current plurality system.

Courtney's only response to the poor performance of modern plurality appears to be that we should wait until the system produces a return to brokerage parties. But what if the brokerage parties are not coming back? Canadian elections have changed considerably and the factors that once contributed to the maintenance of two major 'centrist' parties – particularly the existence of an east/west, nationally-focused economy – appear to be in a state of flux. This is where Courtney's rather narrow focus on the electoral institutions side of elections is a limit in understanding elections as a whole, as clearly modern elections are all about how money and media have changed just about everything. Other volumes in the Democratic Audit series do address these questions but their absence here is a bit jarring, and some overlap given

the fluidity of the topics is surely justified.

Courtney's 'brokerage party' defence of plurality and his concomitant complaints about the potentially dire consequences of PR in a Canadian setting are a constant undercurrent of the book, popping up in nearly every chapter. They are, essentially, the real thesis of the volume. It is surprising then that his handling of voting system effects is often brief and perfunctory. Courtney claims that PR leads to instability, party fragmentation, and a lack of accountability between voters and government. But as evidence he cites Israel, Italy and the Netherlands – hardly a representative sample. Effective comparison requires an assessment of an appropriately broad universe of cases and ones that share roughly similar political circumstances to the country in question (the politics of Israel and Italy are hardly comparable to Canadian conditions). And given the considerable literature that exists today on voting system effects, Courtney's sweeping generalizations about PR systems require more support than a fleeting aside.

Where he does expend more effort on the debates, specifically questions of voter turnout and women's representation, the results are mixed. He rightly points out that the broad and sometimes un-

qualified claims about how the adoption of PR will increase voter turnout are challenged by recent PR election results in New Zealand. But his attempt to use historical data from Manitoba's PR-era to buttress this case, while novel, is methodologically flawed as the whole province never used the system. On women's representation and PR, Courtney argues that there is no automatic relationship between the two. But this is a straw argument as no serious academic work over the past two decades makes such an unqualified claim.

Ultimately, *Elections* is an uneven book. The effective discussion of certain components of our electoral system must be contrasted with the less balanced treatment of voting systems and their effects. In the end, Courtney justifies his choices by recourse to a narrow, procedural view of democracy that he believes is required to hold our fragile country together. Yet it is just this narrow, limited and elitist form of democracy that many Canadians are complaining about, and many experts blame for our current political predicament.

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