Electoral Systems and Reform: The Canadian Experience

In this roundtable discussion, panellists from a Canadian Study of Parliament Group session on the history of voting reform tackle why Canada has its current single-member plurality system, what other alternatives or experiments some jurisdictions in the country have tried, and comment on the perceptible shift in who is driving electoral reform and why expectations for how the process is conducted may have changed.

Harold Jansen, Dennis Pilon, and Laura Stephenson

CPR: How did Canada come to have its current electoral system?

DP: If we go right back to Confederation, all of the colonies were using first-past-the-post to make their electoral choices, though in some cases they had multi-member ridings. We know that at Confederation and up to about 1966 there were a few dual-member ridings. So at the federal level we've used primarily single-member plurality and occasionally multi-member plurality. At the provincial level, especially in some major cities, there have been more instances of multi-member plurality with three to five seats in a given riding.

CPR: Were these multi-member ridings common in other jurisdictions that had developed alongside the Westminster parliamentary system?

DP: I can't speak to Australia and New Zealand but up to the 1840s, when Congress passed a rule, there were multi-member ridings across the United States

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and, of course, in the UK there were examples of multi-member ridings. In fact, in 1867, a majority of ridings in the UK were multi-member ridings, not single-member constituencies. We get a lot of confusion when people say the single-member plurality system is our inheritance from Britain, when actually it's not. You can't inherit something that wasn't a tradition. This is where we began at the federal level.

At the provincial level there was some experimentation, first with the limited vote in Ontario for urban ridings in Toronto. There were multi-member ridings in Toronto and the ruling Liberal Party was never winning seats there, so they introduced the limited vote – a semi-proportional system. This was used for three elections and they were somewhat successful at winning seats. But then, when it appeared it would allow a Labour member to sneak in and disrupt the two-party system, they quickly did away with it.

There were some discussions around voting reform in that period. The Canada First movement in the 1870s raises some interest in electoral reform. Québec Conservatives around the turn of the century also start discussing voting system reform because they can't get many people elected in the province. But really it doesn't start to take off until around World War I when various Liberals and Progressive members start to talk about different kinds of voting systems – and this is happening in other countries as well. Australia is having some discussions; New Zealand has already adopted and then gotten rid of the second-ballot majority system; and of course there are very big discussions in the United Kingdom at various points and throughout Europe.

At this time, some municipalities change to a single transferable vote system across Western Canada. But a lot of them very quickly get rid of it because it's just too difficult to do manually. The only exceptions are places where class politics start to emerge – for example, with the Winnipeg General Strike, or the One Big Union in western Canada, etc. In those places where class conflict was particularly strong, like Winnipeg and Calgary, the use of different voting systems seem to stick around for some time. And perhaps Harold could pick things up there.

CPR: Harold, what types of systems were used in the Prairie provinces around this time?

HJ: From 1910-1920 there's huge interest in electoral reform. The *Grain Growers' Guide*, a very famous and political publication, had a lot of writing about it. We tend to focus on the Western alienation in terms of the political content of the *Grain Growers' Guide*, but there was also a lot of discussion on institutional reform. They provided a lot of very detailed information to farmers about electoral reforms – 'here's how it works, here's why it's better'. There was a huge interest among farmers' movements in addition to the labour movements Dennis spoke of. As the farmers became more politically active on the Prairies, this was one of their demands and it became imbued in this Prairie populism movement we saw in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and even a little in Ontario.

In Manitoba, we have the labour radicalism in Winnipeg and farmer populism in the rural areas. Manitoba's Liberal government decides it's going to bring in a single transferable vote system, but they limit it to Winnipeg. It's a mixture of trying to appease people who want this, but also with a healthy dose of self-interest as it helps to contain Labour. It's always a mix of principle and partisan self-interest. The Liberals tried to forestall the rise of Labour, but the Progressives win in 1922. They change the electoral system again, but instead of proportional representation or the single transferable ballot in the rural areas they introduce the alternative vote and get to dominate the rural areas because it's a majoritarian system and a lot of their opposition in the cities is divided because it's a proportional system. It's a bit of a compromise, and there were legitimate concerns in the 1920s about creating large multi-member districts when travel and communication was more difficult; however, it's hard not to see a healthy dose of partisan interest.

Harold Jansen

In Alberta, in 1921, the United Farmers end up winning. In that first term they copy what happened in Manitoba. They bring STV to Edmonton and Calgary, and briefly in Lethbridge, and they have the alternative vote in rural areas. Again, the United Farmers do well in the rural areas, sweeping these seats, and their opposition in the cities, mostly Liberals and Conservatives, but also some Labour types, is divided. And interestingly in Saskatchewan nothing happens. There isn't any change. The Liberals in Saskatchewan manage to hold off the farmers as an organized political force, but the farmers are so dominant there they don't really need to be.

CPR: Perhaps Laura could jump in here and bring in some more contemporary examples of these debates?

LS: I can comment on why we still have first-past-the-post and why it hasn't changed across all the provinces.

We've seen several different provinces experiment with different systems to different degrees over the years. More recently, we've seen some Maritime provinces, Québec, Ontario and British Columbia have debates about switching to another system. Each time the governments go about promoting reform or engaging in discussions and consultations in different ways. We'd had two citizens' assemblies, in BC and Ontario, which is the broadest type of engagement, I
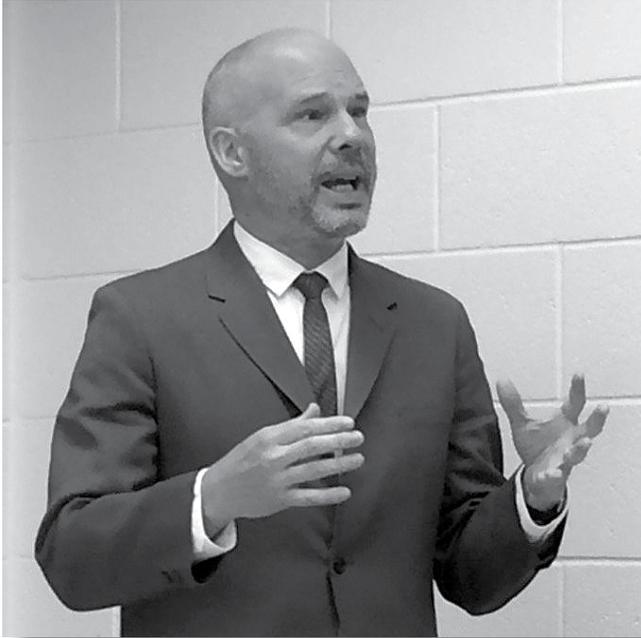
Dennis Pilon

think, in terms of what we want to do with the electoral system. In both of those cases the referendum was the final step in the process and in both cases it failed, so that's something to make note of.

Other provinces have started with commissions that have had various ways of doing consultation and getting input from the citizenry. In some cases, and I'm thinking of New Brunswick and Québec, they went down the road of looking into options that might be reasonable and then there was a change in government or a change of heart and it just didn't go any further. In Prince Edward Island they had a referendum on their electoral reform proposal. The proposal was developed by a commission that evaluated the options, and it failed as well. But they are taking it up again and are going to have a plebiscite with several options this fall.

What we see is a lot of talk and a lot of options for electoral reform, some for more pressing reasons than others. In some cases there was a "wrong winner election," where the party that won the most seats did not win the most votes, and that was the impetus for reform. Out east, certainly in Prince Edward Island, the pressure comes from wanting an effective opposition. If you have a legislature that is almost exclusively one party, then clearly the principle of having a strong opposition to hold the government to account cannot be met.

Nonetheless, across all these cases there has not been change – either due to a government not wanting change or by the citizenry not voting in favour of change to the required extent.

CPR: How often are proposals for electoral reform driven by principle (for example, consensus about the need to examine changing the system after a wrong winner election) versus partisan interests (a new system helping a party win or consolidate power)? Are there any trends?

DP: I think they're almost always driven by a degree of partisan interest. Even when we look back at the populist movements in the early part of the century that were talking about electoral reform – probably the largest discussion about the issue – it was still one theme of many. The public has never been in the driver's seat of our institutions – those have always been elite-designed and elite-maintained. Issues like electoral reform have tended to come to the fore when the elites are facing some sort of terrible crisis or problem.

There are a couple of episodes at the federal level we didn't discuss. In the 1921 election, three of the five parties elected were in favour of changing the voting system, at least nominally, but they didn't once they came to power. No deal was struck between them. But in the run-up to that election it really became a fall back issue for parties that didn't know what the future held. For the Liberals, they were coming out of WWI having split in half, some going into the Union government. Two of their key allied groups were defecting into their own parties: the farmers and labour. So they reached for voting reform, like we always see elites reach for voting reforms across Western countries, in desperation to prevent either another party from coming to power (usually a left-wing party), or their own annihilation.

We see Mackenzie King promise voting reform again before the 1935 election, a point where the party system again is fracturing into different groups. Of course, once he's safely back in power, it's dispatched to a committee and forgotten about.

In British Columbia, in the early 50s, the alternative vote was adopted. Again, the Liberals and the Conservatives had joined together in a coalition to prevent the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation from winning under the current system when it looked like they could get a plurality.

I think if we're looking for patterns in the past and up to the present, it is partisan interest that drives it, not principle. Our voting systems don't have public input – they are crafted by those who want to keep or maintain power.

LS: I would just add that the nature of partisan involvement in recent reform episodes is somewhat different, though. It now seems to be coming about because there is public pressure. Certainly we've seen parties both willing and not willing to take up voting reform, and that makes a difference when it comes to moving the process forward. But when it comes up in British Columbia, for example, or to some extent in Ontario, the process began because there was some public pressure that the parties responded to.

What's particularly interesting about the systems currently being considered by the federal committee is that there isn't a specific one being put forward, even though we know how certain systems might affect the future of the current political parties. Instead, it's a much more open process.

In most recent cases, there's been a citizen-driven push for change, whether it's because of a wrong winner election or just in response to a general democratic deficit; politicians capitalize on that and make it part of their policy promises. Of course, if the reform episode occurs over the course of more than one government, it can be shunted aside if the new one doesn't consider it a priority. But if you look at the current case of PEI, there also seems to be openness to any system or any change that does something to address the problems that can occur with the current system.

HJ: What I find interesting in the current federal case is that we haven't seen the kinds of things we've seen in PEI, such as the lack of an opposition, or a wrong winner election as we saw in BC in the run-up to their debate. We haven't really had those kinds of issues at the federal level. There are always certain groups of people pushing for electoral reform, but if there was a dramatic surge to which the current crop of politicians were responding, I missed it.

DP: I wouldn't disagree with Laura that there is a degree of public pressure, but when you look at which parties have taken up the issue and what kind of systems they favour, there is a partisan interest involved. And, at the very least, it is a policy that they can tack on to a general list of reforms. Parties don't like to make big promises about money, but they can

Laura Stephenson

make promises about 'reform.' It just sounds lovely; it's mushy; it's not clear what it means.

But if they do end up going through with the motions of discussing electoral reform and they either don't want it to happen or don't like the direction it's heading, they can set up ways to ensure it fails – either through super-majority rules or by starving the process of funds.

CPR: When a jurisdiction in Canada embarks on a journey towards electoral reform, how much do they look at past experiences in this country? Do they more often look internationally?

HJ: Generally in Canada we do a pretty terrible job of studying our provinces and provincial governments. There's been a real bias towards the federal level. That's unfortunate, because the provinces have been excellent laboratories, running experiments; but, once they're over they aren't looked at very much. So, for example, opponents of proportional representation may look at countries that have struggled with that model, like Italy or Israel. We tend to look comparatively elsewhere rather than what has been the experience in our own country.

I did have the opportunity to appear before the committee studying electoral reform to speak about some of these provincial experiences, and they were

interested in those examples. But I think much more of the focus has been the process of selecting a system, rather than any system itself. My impression has been that much of the discussion has focused on whether we should have a referendum or not, how we might get citizens to buy-in or not. There was a lot of interest in how we've done referenda at the provincial level and their experience with citizen assemblies. The focus has very much been on process.

DP: When I met with the founders of Fair Vote Canada in 2000, they really didn't know anything about Canada's past experience with different types of voting systems. So, I gave them a bit of background, explained how the processes worked and ultimately how and why the experiments ended. At that time, their strategy was built around a referendum. They believed if they could just put the issue before Canadians, their arguments were so clear and so much better than the status quo, that Canadians would rush into their arms. They really underestimated the politics of the process. In some ways they were wonderfully naïve in that they really believed the debate would simply involve fact-based arguments where different sides would share their views and people would weigh their options to make up their minds. They were caught off-guard about just how vicious the political battles would be, and the type of misinformation that would be shared by political opponents and the media. It was very difficult to get a fair and unbiased treatment of the issue in the media. The media themselves have been key players in keeping our current electoral system in place for reasons that are not entirely clear. It's been interesting to see how advocacy groups like Fair Vote and others have shifted their view of the kind of process that should take place.

LS: I do think that while the provincial processes don't seem to have really informed what's happening at the federal level right now, they have informed each other. I think it's clear that Ontario referred to what had gone on in British Columbia prior to launching its Citizens' Assembly.

DP: I think the current parliamentarians are very much interested in a fact-based process. When we look at the provincial citizen assemblies, a fact-based approach was what was happening initially, and they produced some fantastic work. But when the electoral reform becomes political, and partisan, the general public then begins to take its cues from the parties they support. If their party is fine with it, then they'll probably be fine with it. If the party

is upset about it, then those voters will also suggest they want more answers.

CPR: Is there anything we haven't yet touched upon in this discussion that any of you would like to bring up?

DP: A lot of political scientists have treated electoral reform like a buffet – all systems are generally equal, so just pick which one you prefer. But if we look at it historically and comparatively, voting reform is part of the democratization process. Looking at Western industrialized countries, we go from systems where only certain people can vote. And then, through various political struggles, elites are forced to opon up the political system to include others. The choices of the institutions often reflect the interests of the people making concessions. There are compromises between those who want democracy and those who don't. As a result, some of the institutions end up being much less democratic. That's certainly been the case in Canada. If we look at other countries, some of the threats to the elites have been much more serious, and so they had to concede a great deal more democracy. So the proportional systems they created were clearly more democratic, more representative, offering more inclusive policies.

In Canada, our democratization process emerged in a much more tepid way. Elites were not as threatened, and so they did not have to concede as much. When today we look at the arguments in favour of keeping the current system, they aren't democratic. Political scientists will often look at systems post hoc for explanations as to why various systems were kept in place. But really, when it comes to why politicians decide to keep certain systems in place, it's almost always about power – to maintain some sort of system where certain groups will have the power and other groups will not.

It may be fair to say that there is no perfect voting system - there is no perfect anything - but I argue there are clearly more imperfect ones than others, and ours is the most imperfect, from a democratic point of view. We know people vote party and we know our current system handles representing that poorly. I have yet to see a compelling reason offered for the wild distortions in voter equality produced by our system, particularly in the way it punishes voters that are dispersed compared to those that are not. Instead we see people lauding 'letting the people decide', even though we know that many will be unaware of the process and/or poorly informed. But

what of the higher order principle in a democracy that as many voters as a possible should get their desired representation? In sanctioning a vote or the idea that the choice of voting system is about equally valid preferences, aren't we just saying that it is OK for a majority to vote to diminish other people's voting rights? That doesn't sound very democratic.

HJ: To me, the interesting thing has been the focus on process. Electoral systems have this special institution place. Parties are important actors in the process. Certain processes like the Citizens' Assembly arguably therefore leave an important group of participants out of the discussion. I think we have to remember that citizens are voters too, and therefore they are also participants in their electoral system. What strikes me about what's being done now versus what might have been done a century ago on the Prairies is the demands or expectations over public engagement or involvement in the process. They are much higher! Even looking back at Alberta and Manitoba, these were populist movements, but there was no serious consideration of doing this through a referendum – this was done by legislatures acting on their own, passing laws and foisting them on the public – and that wasn't a big deal. Expectations have clearly changed. At the same time, it's not clear to me that citizens are particularly interested in learning all details and the ins and outs of each system to cast informed votes. That's really the struggle we have. How do you get citizen buy-in to the process, which is important at some level, while still remembering that many of these citizens don't have the time or the interest to engage in this fairly. There have been interesting shifts in our thinking around citizenship engagement, and also from citizens about their involvement in institutional discussions.

LS: I agree with Harold. The roles of the citizen and of the party have greatly shifted. The citizens have a greater degree of input, and they are also making choices. The shift now has parties saying, 'we know what's good for us, and we'll campaign for that, but when it comes down to what's best for Canada, we'll let the citizens sort it out.' And I think that just reflects what we know about electoral systems – no system is perfect, there are pros and cons to every system, and there are good reasons for liking and disliking almost all of them. With the complexity of this issue, it's interesting that to a great extent the politicians are saying to voters, 'we're going to put it in your hands.'