How to Understand Voting System Reform … and Act On it

Submission to Yukon Legislative Assembly – Special Committee on Electoral Reform

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Abstract: How to Understand Voting System Reform … and Act On It

A jurisdiction's voting system is arguably the crucial component of the representative process and should be judged by the most substantive democratic criteria possible, namely its ability to facilitate an equitable inclusion of the diversity of its society and their views. When it comes to considering how best to judge different specific voting systems, it is crucial that decision-makers apply the right standard when assessing what process is best to make a decision. In recent voting system reform efforts in Canada a preference model of voting system choice has come to dominate the processes, one where various voting systems are defined by the values they allegedly promote in terms of their workings and outcomes, with the public then encouraged to choose a system on the basis of the values they prefer, typically via a referenda. This submission critically examines the claims justifying this approach – claims rooted in concerns about voting system simplicity, governing stability, the importance of local representation and over-representation of small parties, and political accountability – and finds no compelling evidence that these issues are either important to voters or have any real impact on the political system, and, as such, inform values that represent genuine trade-offs in the choice of voting systems. As an alternative to the preference approach, the submission offers a democratization approach, one that approaches the process of voting system reform by first examining what voters are trying to accomplish when they vote and then assessing which voting system would best facilitate them accomplishing their goals. The submission also addresses the debate about whether referenda are appropriate or necessary in choosing a voting system, and suggests that much depends on whether voting system reform is understood as a choice between rival but equally legitimate values or an effort to equalize the individual's 'power to elect' and expand minority voting rights. As the evidence supplied in this submission supports the latter interpretation, it is argued that a referendum on the voting system would be neither necessary nor appropriate.

Author Biography

Dr. Dennis Pilon has been an Associate Professor in the Department of Politics at York University in Toronto since 2011. Before that he was an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Victoria. He has a BA in Sociology and History and an MA in History from Simon Fraser University and a Ph.D. in Political Science from York University.

He has been researching and writing about the practical workings of voting systems and historical/contemporary processes of voting system reform for over three decades, producing two single-authored books on the subject, roughly two dozen book chapters, journal articles and academic papers, as well as a considerable number of submissions to governments, public bodies, and news media (e.g. op/eds). His two books on the topic are *The Politics of Voting: Reforming Canada's Electoral System* and *Wrestling with Democracy: Voting Systems as Politics in the Twentieth Century West*, which cover both the Canadian and comparative western contexts of the issue. The key concerns taken up in the research have been to gauge how different voting systems have worked in practice and assess the political reasons they were introduced and have been maintained over time. Nearly all of Dr. Pilon's research, submissions and public writing can be accessed on his academia.edu site here: https://yorku.academia.edu/DennisPilon

In addition to his academic work he has extensive experience supporting the more concrete practice of elections, acting as a Deputy District Election Officer in the Vancouver Burrard constituency in two provincial elections in British Columbia, providing research and supporting briefs for various court cases related to election rules, and acting as an expert adviser on election issues to government, political parties, and civil society organizations like Fair Vote Canada.

Executive Summary: How to Understand Voting System Reform … and Act On It

Introduction: Framing the debate over voting system reform

- there are two broad approaches to taking up voting system reform, the preference approach and the democratization approach
- the preference approach argues that voting system choice involves choosing from amongst the competing values that different voting systems embody, and that each choice is valid but represents trade-offs in terms of what they prioritize in terms of process and outcomes
- the democratization approach argues that voting system choice must be informed by an understanding of what voters are trying to accomplish by voting and then using that information to choose a voting system that will best allow them to accomplish their goals
- a recourse to evidence supports the democratization approach over the preference approach

1. The limits of the preference approach

- this section explores the various claims of the preference approach in terms of evidence
- on whether ballots should be simple, it finds no evidence that the different kinds of voting systems pose a problem for voters i.e. too complex to use
- on whether governing stability is an issue with the use of different voting systems, it finds no evidence that different voting systems are intrinsically more or less stable e.g. there have been a similar number of elections held in western countries regardless of voting system
- on whether questions of representation are a key difference between voting systems, particularly in the role of a local member and small parties' impact on governing, evidence does not support the view that either issue is a problem
- on whether different voting systems create more or less accountability, the concept is both too poorly defined or not realistically applied to be meaningful
- this leaves only values concerned with individual voter preferences and party representation as demonstrably supported by evidence

2. What voters are trying to do by voting

- surveys of voters' views about representation lead to contradictory and unclear results
- examining what voters consistently do in elections can provide a reliable portrait of what they are trying to accomplish by voting
- evidence from patterns of voting results across time and space is that voters generally vote party more than on any other kind of basis e.g. local representative, geographic locale, identity, etc.
- voters vote party as an information shortcut in making decisions

3. Critically assessing referenda

- many assert that voting system change in Canada must be accomplished via a referenda to be democratic
- this ignores the tension in democratic theory between decisions over inclusive approaches to representation and majoritarian decision rules

- this ignores that few countries today or in the past have used referenda to choose their voting system
- this ignores the partisan motivations promoting referenda use on this issue and the way they have shaped the process in self-interested ways
- voters in referenda use similar information short-cuts to the ones they use in representative elections, which means that referenda results usually just represent reflected political party positions on the issues rather than uniquely different ones
- defences of referenda for voting system choice ignore that values did not inform voting system choice in the past in western countries and have not been driving the process of reconsidering voting systems in most cases today
- given that the competing values of the preference model were shown to be without empirical support, referenda on voting systems are basically asking voters whether they 'prefer' more or less electoral equality, equity and fairness, which violates a first order democratic principle of inclusion

Conclusion

- given that the preference model provides no support for its claims that different voting systems embody competing values that represent acceptable and equally legitimate trade-offs, and given that we can readily ascertain what voters are trying to do in voting, the committee should simply recommend the voting system it thinks would best allow voters to accomplish their goals without recourse to a referendum

How to Understand Voting System Reform … and Act On It

The voting system is arguably the key institution regulating the process of political representation at the institutional level in western societies. It is the aperture through which claims for representation and influence must pass. The choice affects how people are represented, how parties compete for influence, how opposition behaves, and how governments are formed. And yet, as an institutional process, the voting system remains largely opaque to the voting public, despite being directly engaged by them in every voting opportunity. This is because historically and in the contemporary era voting systems have been the product of elite interest and influence and, once established, rarely revisited. Thus the Yukon Legislative Assembly's decision to explore reforming the territory's voting system represents an historic and relatively rare opening to discuss this important institution. It represents an opportunity to bring democratic values like equality, equity and inclusion into the decision about how to convert votes into seats in a representative body. But in doing so it is crucially important to understand how different processes of voting system reform may themselves be more or less defensible and more or less credible in terms of the claims they make. In pursuing this, the standards by which these processes must be judged should be democratic ones, i.e. broad inclusion and voter equality. To explore this question, the submission is organised into four parts: an introduction that frames the debate over voting system reform processes, a critical investigation of the factual claims of the dominant preference approach to voting system reform, an exploration of just what voters are trying to accomplish with voting, and a critical assessment of referenda as means of choosing voting systems. The purpose of the submission is to make the case for a more substantively democratic approach to reforming Yukon's voting system.

Introduction: Framing the debate over voting system reform

In taking up the work of the committee I would suggest that you need to address two important questions:

1) What is the problem that voting system reform is intended to solve?

2) What are the values that should inform the deliberation and decision over:
    a) the substance of this issue?
    b) how to proceed?

In the study and debate over voting systems and voting system reform there are two broad approaches to answering these questions. One widespread approach amongst political scientists is the **preference** approach. In this approach the problem to be addressed is how to decide between different kinds of voting system. Addressing the substance of the issue involves identifying the different values that allegedly inform the different voting systems based on a variety of typical outcomes they produce. The question of how to proceed involves working out how to allow the public to register their preference for one system over another in terms of the values they support. The other common approach is the **democratization** approach. In this

approach the problem to be addressed is how to assess the degree to which the institutions that voters use in elections facilitate recognizably and defensibly democratic outcomes. Addressing the substance of the issue here involves working out what voters are trying to do when voting and then judging to what extent any given voting system helps or hinders their efforts to achieve those goals. The question of how to proceed involves choosing institutions that best facilitate such results, assessing and addressing both the historic and contemporary barriers to reform, and then simply making the change.

In the course of my extensive historical and practice-oriented research on voting systems I have found little empirical support for the preference approach. Simply put, it lacks an appreciation of the actual historical origins and struggle over electoral institutions and the values it claims undergird or inform different voting systems are not supported by the evidence of what actually occurs with the use of different systems.[1] It is a popular approach amongst political scientists because they tend to take up what social scientists call an 'ideal type' approach to studying institutions. In other words, they reason the purpose of institutions from what appears to be their apparent function and typically do so in a non-historical way. For example, in assessing why Canada uses single member ridings a political scientist might reason that they exist to provide local representation, a link between a local area and an individual in the legislature. They might even conduct surveys with voters that appear to confirm such reasoning.[2] But this does not mean that such institutional configurations were created with that intent in mind. In fact, we know they were not, given the widespread use of multi-member ridings in Canadian provinces in the twentieth century. When we submit most of the claimed values undergirding Canada's voting system we discover they are, at best, post hoc rationalizations for an institution introduced and maintained for very different reasons.

By contrast, the more historical, fact-based orientation of the democratization approach leads us to explore how different voting systems have actually worked, the kinds of results they have produced over time, and the political reasons they have been introduced, sustained, or reformed. An historical study of Canadian political institutions confirms that, far from representing the realization of the kind of normative values claimed by the preference approach, our electoral institutions were largely the product of partisan self-interest and

[1] For an evidence-based comparison of the operation of Canada's voting system with the pattern of concrete results produced in comparable western European countries using proportional voting systems, see Dennis Pilon, *The Politics of Voting: Reforming Canada's Electoral System*, (Toronto: Emond Montgomery, 2007). For a comparative historical overview of a more than a century of voting system reform in 18 western countries, see Dennis Pilon, *Wrestling with Democracy: Voting Systems as Politics in the Twentieth Century West*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013). For a more recent historical and contemporary overview of voting system reform efforts in Canada, see Dennis Pilon, "Voting Systems and Party Politics," in Alain-G. Gagnon and A. Brian Tanguay (eds.), *Canadian Parties in Transition: Recent Trends and New Paths for Research, 4th edition*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 217-49 [included as an appendix to this report].

[2] For illustrative examples of this approach, see Bruce Cain, John Ferejohn and Morris Fiorina, *The Personal Vote: Constituency Service and Electoral Independence,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987); and Nick Ruderman, "Canadians' Evaluations of MPs: Performance Matters," in Elizabeth Gidengil and Heather Bastedo (eds.), *Canadian Democracy from the Ground Up: Perceptions and Performance*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 41-61.

broader social and political struggle. Whether we're talking about changes to the franchise, the introduction of the secret ballot, the conduct of election administration, or reforms to districting rules or campaign finance, all have been massively influenced by self-interest, defined as party self-interest, with decisive weight accorded to those parties in control of the executive.[3] Not surprisingly, historic debates over Canada's voting systems have also been defined by the triumph of party self-interest rather than serving the public good. Attempts to recast such struggles as merely choices between competing 'values' are what the dean of Canadian electoral studies Norman Ward once called 'politics masquerading as principles.' In other words, public actors may claim their choices are for the public good but it would be naïve to accept such claims at face value, especially when there is so much evidence to the contrary. Now in saying that institutional rules are seldom simply the product of a normative 'values' based discussion does not mean that institutions and institutional reforms can't sometimes also serve the public good. The shift to an independent boundary commission approach to designing federal ridings is a good example of how a process fueled by party self interest inadvertently also ended up serving the public interest.[4]

Thus, based on my research into historical and contemporary processes of voting system reform, as well as a systematic examination of how different voting systems work in practice throughout western countries, I would strongly advise the committee to approach its task utilizing the democratization approach. What this means in practical terms is that the committee would need to work out what people in the Yukon are trying to accomplish by voting, drawing from the best evidence of what we know about voting from academic research as well as a good measure of common sense, and then choose a voting system that best facilitates letting voters get what they want. The values informing such an undertaking should be demonstrably democratic ones, highlighting fairness, equity, and inclusion.

To aid the committee in its work I would like to delve further into three themes, again drawing from concrete evidence about how voting systems work and why we use the ones we do, addressing 1) the limits of the preference approach, 2) what voters are trying to do by voting, and 3) critically assessing referenda.

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[3] For research tracking the historical struggle over Canadian electoral institutions, see Norman Ward, *The Canadian House of Commons: Representation*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950); D.G.G. Kerr, "The 1867 Elections in Ontario: The Rules of the Game," *Canadian Historical Review*, 51:4 (December 1970), 369-85; Norman Ward, "Electoral Corruption and Controverted Elections," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 15: 1 (1949), 74–86; Gordon Stewart, "John A. Macdonald's Greatest Triumph," *Canadian Historical Review*, 63: 1 (1982), 3–33; Khayyam Z Paltiel, *Studies in Canadian Party Finance: Committee on Election Expenses*, (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1966); and K.Z. Paltiel, "Party Finance Before World War I." In R.K. Carty (ed.), *Canadian Political Party Systems*, (Toronto: Broadview, 1992), 122-7.

[4] See John C. Courtney, *Commissioned Ridings: Defining Canada's Electoral Districts*, (Montreal- Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001).

1. The limits of the preference approach

The preference approach has become an appealing way to introduce people to the voting system issue over the last 20 years in part because a) it represents the choices and trade-offs involved in clear and simple way, and b) it builds off whatever partial knowledge people may already possess about Canada's existing electoral institutions.[5] However, in doing so it misrepresents what is and isn't important in the debate and mischaracterizes the workings of the different systems. As a result, its presentation of the choices, the reasons for choosing them, and the rationale for how to make the choice itself cannot be supported by recourse to evidence. Here I will first review how the preference approach tends to present the issue and then go into detail about the problems with its claims.

The preference approach begins by suggesting that all voting systems are democratically defensible, that all have their advantages and disadvantages. For our existing single-member first-past-the-post voting or single member plurality (SMP) system they claim its strengths include that it is simple to understand, connects a local representative to the legislature, and tends to produce stable, single-party majority governments. Additionally, some suggest its strengths also include how it limits the entry and influence of small parties and instead encourages the creation of big-tent brokerage parties. On the weakness side, they note how it routinely distorts the relationship of votes to seats, usually favouring larger and/or regionally concentrated parties, results in a considerable number of 'wasted votes' (i.e. votes that do not contribute to the election of anyone), discourages the formation/entry of new parties, and responds slowly to demands for representational diversity. For proportional representation (PR) systems the preference approach suggests their strengths include more proportional outcomes for parties, a more competitive environment for new parties, and better track record in representing social diversity. On the weakness side, they point to the lack of legislative majority governments, the disproportionate influence of smaller parties (particularly as part of a governing coalition), the difficulty in voting a party out of power, the lack of a local representative (in some cases), and the complexity in producing results from the votes casts. With these basic differences between the systems now established, the preference approach suggests the voters can decide which voting system they prefer by reference to what they value e.g. local member, majority governments, more accurate and/or diverse representation, etc. And given the approach is predicated on the normative value of choosing, it makes sense for these actors to want to leave the decision in the hands of the voters themselves.

[5] Key examples of the preference approach can be found in the influential 2004 Law Commission of Canada report *Voting Counts: Electoral Reform for Canada*, the 2016 Canadian House of Commons Special Committee on Electoral Reform report *Strengthening Democracy in Canada: Principles, Process and Public Engagement for Electoral Reform*, and in various contributions contained in Andrew Potter, Daniel Weinstock and Peter Loewen (eds.), *Should We Change How We Vote? Evaluating Canada's Electoral System*, (McGill-Queens' University Press, 2017).

The overall effect of these claims is to frame the discussion of voting system reform in particular ways, highlighting what their proponents think should be considered important in the discussion. However, as we shall demonstrate, many of the claimed issues are not demonstrably problematic issues at all, let alone important to voters. We can break down the various problem areas into claimed concerns about simplicity, stability, representation, and accountability.

1.1 Simplicity

We often hear that Canada's single member plurality voting system is 'simple,' meaning it is simple for voters to use (they need only make a mark next to their choice) and it is simple when it comes to tallying the votes and determining a winner. By contrast we hear that PR systems are 'complicated' and 'confusing,' meaning that they require more from the voter to indicate their choice and that determining the winners from the votes cast is a more involved, sometimes mathematically complex process. Thus the issue of the simplicity versus complexity of a voting system is raised as a value trade-off in voting system choice, the implication being that the complexity of the ballot may have a negative impact on voting outcomes, perhaps contributing to confusing and/or frustrating voters. However these claims are not accompanied by any evidence to demonstrate that a real trade-off exists. There are a number of responses to these concerns. First, PR voting systems are not really that complicated to use, most involving perhaps two choices (e.g. a local candidate and a party choice) or the need to rank more than one candidate. Compared to processes most people engage with every day, PR voting is nowhere near as complicated as using a smart phone, as an example. Second, any voting system that is unfamiliar to voters can lead to confusion, including single member plurality. In practice, the successful use of any voting system by voters requires effective election administration and an active mobilization of voters by political parties. Third, there is no evidence that voters in PR countries find their systems too confusing to use. In fact, their ballot spoilage rates (i.e. the percentage of ballots marked incorrectly) are low and comparable to Canada.[6] Finally to say that Canada's voting system is simple typically only refers to how ballots are marked and tabulated but ignores evidence that suggests Canadians struggle to understand how the system produces its overall results. For instance, few voters could explain how the federal Liberal party was able to convert 39% of the votes in the 2015 election into 54% of the seats. Or on the nature of 'majority government,' evidence suggests that many Canadians are confused about what they represent. In a 2001 surveys roughly half the respondents thought

[6] Research into how complicated voters find different voting systems has not uncovered any serious problems. David Farrell's research on ballot spoilage across a broad range of countries in the 1990s found Canada (SMP), Ireland (STV), and Germany (MMP) with nearly the same level of spoiled ballots—between 1.3 and 1.5% of the total votes cast. Longer term studies of STV use in Ireland and Canada also suggest that voters did not find the system too complicated. For instance, voters in Manitoba and Alberta used STV for three-and-a-half decades and most had no trouble marking their ballots. In that period ballot spoilage in Winnipeg ranged from 0.9 to 1.8% of the total votes. See David Farrell, *Electoral Systems: A Comparative Introduction*, (Houndsmill, UK: Palgrave, 2001), 202; Harold Jansen, "The Political Consequences of the Alternative Vote: Lessons from Western Canada," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 37: 3 (2004), 647–69; and Paul McKee, "Ireland." in V. Bogdanor and D. Butler (eds.), *Democracy and Elections: Electoral Systems and their Political Consequences*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 167-89.

that legislative majority governments in Canada also represented a majority of the voters, even though they seldom do.[7] Thus the issue of the simplicity of the ballot is really a non-issue in that it doesn't emerge as a problem anywhere with any consistency that would suggest it could be linked to the use of any specific voting system.

1.2 Stability

In the preference approach the tendency to create single party majority governments is seen as a positive for the single member plurality voting system while the lack of single party majority governments in PR systems is seen as a weakness. The implication here is that stability is a value trade-off and that single member plurality systems provide more stability by having a single party in control of the executive while PR systems are less stable because they are typically governed by a coalition of parties that share executive power. The thinking here is that people who 'prefer' more stability may be willing to sacrifice more proportional results in making the choice over a voting system. But, as with claims about the importance of simplicity in voting, no evidence is provided to sustain these claims. When we turn to the practice of governing in western PR systems it is hard to see anything distinctively unstable going on compared to non-PR countries. On a host of measures – life expectancy, economic growth and development, quality of life – these countries appear to be stable, successfully governed locales. One way to address this issue is to compare the frequency of elections over time in PR and non-PR countries, the thinking being that more elections might suggest instability, like an inability to govern a full term, breakdown in coalition relations, etc. However in comparing PR with non-PR countries, we find that both have had a roughly similar number of elections over the postwar period. For instance between 1945 to 2018 Germany and Italy had 19 elections, Sweden had 21, while Canada had 22.[8] As stability does not appear to be an issue connected to the use of any specific voting system, it doesn't really represent a trade off in choosing one.

1.3 Representation

When it comes to questions of representation the preference approach to voting systems raises concerns about the presence or absence of a geographically local member and the possibility of undue influence from small parties in coalition governments in PR countries. The implication of the first point is that uniquely local interests are an important part of what is represented in democratic systems and that without some form of local voice embedded in the voting system the quality of representation may be judged as deficient. The implication of the second point is that PR systems allow small parties to have an influence on executive decisions while part of governing coalitions that is out of proportion with their popularity.

The first question will be taken up in more detail in section 2 when we examine what voters are trying to do when voting (spoiler: it is not about electing a locally-focused representative) but

[7] See Darrell Bricker and Martin Redfern, "Canadian Perspectives on the Voting System," *Policy Options*, 22: 6 (July-August 2001), 22–4. These results echoed similar findings from the Lortie Commission research in the 1990s.
[8] For a comparison of the number of elections in PR and SMP-using countries, see Pilon, *The Politics of Voting*, 63.

here we can address to what extent representation in western countries is defined by local issues by examining what elected members do, specifically to what extent do they vote in legislatures along local lines rather than in some other way. Looking at the evidence, the answer is clear and consistent across both the federal and provincial levels in Canada – elected representatives overwhelming vote along party lines.[9] Indeed, it is highly likely that this is what local people want their representatives to do, at least for those voters that supported the elected member. The point is, when we look at how elected members function as representatives in Canada there is little evidence that anything local trumps their primary role in supporting their party.

The second question concerning undue influence from small parties in governing coalitions under PR is often raised by North American political scientists but seldom explored in terms of what concretely happens in western European or Anglo-American countries using PR. Given that we have more than century of experience of coalition governments elected with PR systems in western Europe and 25 years using PR in New Zealand, this seems a surprising oversight. In examining the practice of coalition government formation in these locales what we find is that PR-using countries have developed various norms to work out the precise influence accorded to parties joining a governing coalition, the precise mix in each case the product of negotiation and an assessment of the public support for the different players as reflected in the voting results. For the most part these negotiations produce workable, stable coalition governments. Occasionally disputes arise, sometimes with a particular party choosing to leave the coalition. What voters think about the coalition arrangements and/or the behaviour/demands of any particular party is often registered at the next election in terms of increasing/decreasing support for the coalition partners as a group or shifts in support amongst the coalition members, with some gaining, some losing support. All these changes in voting patterns are used by parties to judge what voters think of the balance of policies reflected in the previous governing coalition agreement, with changes in the balance of influence effected accordingly.[10] Rather than raising speculative fears of the 'tail wagging the dog' in PR systems, that small parties gain undue influence, we would be better served by looking at what parties in countries with PR systems actually do to create workable coalition government and how they share influence amongst themselves. On balance, the claims of inflated small party influence is not supported by reference to what actually occurs in practice.

[9] See Jean-Francois Godbout and Bjorn Hoyland, "Unity in Diversity? The Development of Political Parties in the Parliament of Canada, 1867–2011," *British Journal of Political Science*, 47:3 (2017), 545-69.

[10] For insight into the varied practices of government formation in western European countries using PR, see Lieven De Winter, "The Role of Parliament in Government and Resignation," in Herbert Doring (ed.), *Parliaments and Majority Rule in Western Europe*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 115-51; Wolfgang C. Müller, Kaare Strom (eds.), *Coalition Governments in Western Europe*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), particularly their introductory essay "Coalition Governance in Western Europe: An Introduction," 1-31; and Torbjörn Bergman, Hanna Back, Johan Hellström (eds.), *Coalition Governance in Western Europe*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

1.4 Accountability

Accountability is held to be one of the key strengths of Canada's existing single member plurality system, according to the preference approach. The basic argument is two-fold. On the one hand, the prevalence of single party majority governments is held to clarify the lines of accountability for voters in that voters know who to hold accountable for government actions and the government cannot attempt to duck its responsibility by blaming other parties, as allegedly could occur in a coalition governments. On the other hand, the tendency of the single member plurality system to exaggerate the support for the largest party means that a shift in support from one major party to another major party can effectively 'throw the governing party out,' effecting what political scientists call an 'alternation in power.' By contrast, the concern with elections under PR systems is that the tendency to have coalition governments means that it is possible for parties to avoid taking responsibility for governing actions and instead blame their coalition partners for anything the public doesn't like. And another concern with election accountability under PR systems is that there is a less direct relationship between how voters vote and who forms the government, with the possibility that a party could lose support but still manage to secure a spot in a coalition government.

The notion of 'accountability' as it is applied to debates about voting systems in the preference approach is a poorly developed concept that fails to connect in a realistic way with the power that voters have either individually or collectively or the way that voters make choices in elections. First, depending on the nature of party competition, the single member plurality system can produce unclear and counter-intuitive results when one tries to match seat gains and losses with judgements about voter intent. Depending on how a vote splits amongst parties in a given riding, an elected member could lose their seat with more support than they won it with in the previous election.[11] Or in the election as a whole a party may lose office with more support than they won office with in the previous election. In 1975 the BC NDP lost power with more support than they won office with in 1972. In 1935 the federal Liberals won office with less support than they lost power with in 1930. in 2006 the governing new Brunswick Conservatives gained more support than in the previous election as well as more votes than the opposition Liberals—and still lost the election.[12] Second, the notion of accountability used in the preference approach assumes that voters judge governing performance simply on perceived administrative ability rather than ideology and/or a sense of strong policy differences. Thus in examining polities where parties are aligned along a loose right to left basis it hardly makes sense to suggest that right-wing voters will make their government 'accountable' by electing a left-wing government or vice versa. At the local level this notion of undifferentiated accountability also makes little sense. Who is a local member accountable to, the 40% that supported them or the 60% that supported other candidates? Is it realistic to suggest that a Conservative supporter will make their Conservative representative accountable

[11] Given that a candidate in a single member plurality voting system can conceivably gain a seat with far less than 50% of the vote, 'winning' depends not only on who votes for the winner but also how the overall vote splits amongst the remaining candidates. A winner with 35% of the vote in one election could lose in the next with 40% if voters were to settle on single rival candidate in the second contest.

[12] Pilon, *The Politics of Voting*, 44.

by voting for a non-Conservative candidate? The structure of the voting opportunity under single member plurality works against the kind of accountability claimed for it by the preference approach for two reasons. First, voters in single member plurality systems can only vote for a local candidate thus their influence on the overall electoral outcome is weak. Second, because the character of electoral competition within a single member riding is constrained party voters do not really have a choice amongst candidates that could be said to create realistic policy accountability in terms of what they actually support.

A more realistic concern relates to government alternation and the extent to which any given electoral system might contribute to stasis in both the party system and those who control government. However, when we examine the results produced in PR and non-PR countries we find examples of both, depending on the different political contexts. Thus we can find long periods of one party dominance in PR-using countries like Sweden. And we can find examples of regular periods of governing party alternation in postwar Germany and more recently in New Zealand. So too we can find examples of long periods of one party rule in jurisdictions using single member plurality (e.g. Ontario 1943-85) as well as a more regular alternation of parties in government. If there is a difference between the two systems it is that one party dominance in PR systems typically requires considerably more support (e.g. Sweden, where the social democratic party long registered roughly 50% of the voting support) than single member plurality system where a party can dominate with much less than 50% due to vote splits between other parties (e.g. BC 1952-72).

Concerns that governing parties in PR systems can avoid taking responsibility or that parties can remain in a government coalition even when they lose support are claims that, again, would be best explored empirically rather than raised as speculative fears. What we see going on western PR countries does not match this caricature. Instead, it appears that different countries have developed different norms to address these concerns. On responsibility, it should be clear that politicians in all voting system may try to avoid blame but shifts in voting support suggest that voters do make judgements about their actions. On elections and joining or leaving a governing coalition, many PR countries have norms that see parties lose seats in cabinet or participation in the governing coalition on the basis of a weakened electoral performance, or inversely, an increase in cabinet representation or an invitation to join a governing coalition on the basis of an improved electoral performance.[13] But these factors are also influenced by nature of the party system, where parties fall within it, and the outcome of negotiations amongst parties. And voters sometimes disagree with the outcomes of those negotiations and make their views known in the next election.

[13] The diversity of these norms and the contextual factors that condition their application are explored in Lieven De Winter, "The Role of Parliament in Government and Resignation," in Herbert Doring (ed.), *Parliaments and Majority Rule in Western Europe*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 115-51; Wolfgang C. Müller, Kaare Strom (eds.), *Coalition Governments in Western Europe*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Torbjörn Bergman, Hanna Back, Johan Hellström (eds.), *Coalition Governance in Western Europe*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

The preference approach to voting systems makes a number of broad claims about how different voting systems work and what the implications would be in considering them in terms of trade-offs. But many of the claims are not supported by any evidence. Indeed, they are primarily speculative in nature and evince either a lack of awareness of how different voting system work in practice or offer a rather uncritical take on their workings. In the end, many of the issues claimed to be of importance to voters are not really issues at all and thus do not represent trade-offs that should be considered in the choice of a voting system.

2. What voters are trying to do by voting

At Confederation in 1867 the Canadian governing and representative system was not democratic by any reasonable standard. Voting was restricted to property owning men, balloting was not secret, and the rules governing elections were manipulated by those in power in an arbitrary manner to help them retain power.[14] Over the next century working class men, women, people of colour, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples organized politically and fought for the right to vote. They wanted the vote because it represented a kind of influence. They thought that by voting they might be able to affect the power of the state and, by extension, the state's power over their own lives. However in gaining the right to vote such groups were not able to redesign all the institutions through which their vote might have impact. That power remained in the hands of the traditional political organizations, the dominant parties, who were the very forces that had resisted extending the vote to these groups in the first place. Not surprisingly such traditional political elites made decisions about all manner of electoral institutions, to keep or reform them, on the basis of protecting that power rather than effectively including these new participants. This is the actual historical story of our electoral institutions, one animated by struggle and inequality and partisan self-interest.[15] This is a very different account than the origin story implied in the preference approach to voting systems where institutions appear to be chosen on the basis of values. What this means is that the committee's work in reviewing Yukon's voting system is, by historical standards, a very rare opening to re-evaluate traditional political institutions, assess what they are meant to accomplish and apply democratic standards in making such decisions about reforming them. To do this effectively, the committee needs to understand what voters are trying to do when they cast a vote.

[14] See Dennis Pilon, "The Contested Origins of Canadian Democracy," *Studies in Political Economy*, 98: 2 (2017), 105-23.

[15] Canadian political scientists tend to assume the existence of democracy throughout Canadian history rather than exploring it concretely in terms of when and how it was accomplished and by whom. However, historians have recently taken up the study, highlighting how its origins were shaped by political struggle rather than values and that this process continued well into the twentieth century (and in some ways continues in the present). For an introduction to these complexities, see Julien Maudit and Jennifer Tunnicliffe (eds.), *Constant Struggle: Histories of Canadian Democratization,* (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021); and Joan Sangster, *One Hundred Years of Struggle: The History of Women and the Vote in Canada*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018).

2.1 What voters say

One way to work out what voters are doing by voting would be to ask them. Such an approach would probably produce a wide variety of answers that would certainly be illuminating but hardly conclusive. And simply asking people questions about voting is not as straightforward as it might appear, in part because particular contexts and personal experience influence how people understand and interpret the questions. For instance, studies often ask people about the appropriate role of a local elected member but seldom provide them with a context or basis of comparison to evaluate their responses.[16] As a local, service-oriented type of representation is all they've known, not surprisingly they respond in ways that reinforce conventional ideas about them.

2.2 What voters do

Another way to take up the question would be to examine how people vote. But here we run into a different problem as the vote in a single member plurality system is simultaneously a vote for an individual and a vote for a party (in nearly all cases). So which factor is more important? Which could we say has more influence on the vote? One study attempted to sort this out by asking people how important the local candidate was in making their voting decision with 40% indicating it was important. But then researchers asked them a follow up question about whether they would still consider any local candidate important if they were not also running for the party they supported. Now only 5% of respondents were prepared to say that the candidate choice mattered.[17] Other research has supported these findings, noting how voters often report support for a local candidate basically as a post hoc agreement with their party. In other words, they decide to like the candidate their party has already chosen rather than evaluate candidates on the basis of individual qualities separate or unrelated to party affiliation.[18] On local influence, there is research that claims that local campaigns matter in an election and can account for small differences in the vote achieved locally versus the national average. However this shouldn't be understood to mean that people are voting on the basis of a local candidate. It often means that extra effort in a local area makes a national campaign look more competitive and thus leads more local voters to support it.[19]

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[16] For instance, see Cameron D. Anderson and Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant, "Conceptions of Political Representation in Canada: An Explanation of Public Opinion," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 38:4 (December 2005), 1029-58.

[17] See André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Agnieszka Dobrzynska, and Neil Nevitte, "Does the Local Candidate Matter? Candidate Effects in the Canadian Election of 2000," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 36:3 (July 2003), 657-64.

[18] Research from 2019 found roughly the same percentage of voters prioritizing a local candidate in their vote choice as Blais et al. See Benjamin Allen Stevens, Md Mujahedul Islam, Roosmarijn de Geus, Jonah Goldberg, John R. McAndrews, Alex Mierke-Zatwarnicki, Peter John Loewen and Daniel Rubenson, "Local Candidate Effects in Canadian Elections," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 52 (2019), 83–96. On choosing to like a party's candidate post hoc, see Michael Marsh, "Candidates or Parties? objects of Electoral Choice in Ireland," *Party Politics* 13: 4 2007), 501–28.

[19] See R.K. Carty and M. Eagles, *Politics Is Local: National Politics at the Grassroots*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2005).

The most reliable way to work out what voters are doing by voting is to examine what they vote for and ascertain the pattern of the choices they make over time and across jurisdictions. What we find is that people voting in Canadian federal and provincial (and Yukon) elections almost exclusively vote party. By contrast, candidates running without party affiliation, particularly major party affiliation, generally don't succeed. In other words, locally-focused independent candidate are not what people are voting for. Indeed, such candidates generally gain far less than 1% on average in Canadian elections. When 'independent' candidates do manage to gain election they are almost always disaffected major party politicians who were initially elected under a party banner. And in most cases even those candidates tend to lose.[20] There are other things we can glean from voting results about what voters are and are not voting for at election time. For instance, from the pattern of results we know that they are not voting on the basis of a rural versus urban identity, or racial or ethnic identity, or gender identity. We know this because we have not seen individuals claiming to be rural or identity representatives as their primary identity (as opposed to party) gain election. This is not to say that these issues and identity concerns do not influence voting, they do. But they influence voting around how the parties respond to them rather than forming the basis of separate representational claims. Or they sometimes contribute to the emergence of new parties, as when regionalism gave rise of to the Reform party or French language/identity issues helped spur the creation of the Bloc Quebecois.

2.3 Why voters choose parties

The uniformity with which Canadians vote party may seems surprising, given the past few decades of apparent public disaffection from politics and parties specifically. But there are very good reasons why people still turn to parties when it comes to elections. The major reason is that parties help people participate by simplifying their perception of what the choices are and how to distinguish them from one another.[21] Canadians may not think of themselves or politics generally in terms of 'left' or 'right' but they can connect the policies they support to the parties that are closest to them, and those parties do fall on the left to right ideological continuum.[22] What voters then do is use parties as a proxy for how to respond to new political issues or as knowledgeable policy actors that they can trust. Without cues from parties about policy issues, it is hard for most voters to work out where they stand on the wide range of issues that emerge politically. This is why locales without parties, like municipal government, generally have much lower levels of voter turnout and register very low levels of public knowledge about their political issues, processes and actors.

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[20] See Tamara A. Small and Jane Philpott, "The Independent Candidate," in Alex Marland and Thierry Giasson (eds.), *Inside the Campaign: Managing Elections in Canada*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020), 197-206.

[21] See Arthur Lupia and Mathew D. McCubbins, *The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They Need to Know?* (Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Arthur Lupia, *Uninformed: Why People Know So Little About Politics and What We Can Do About It*, (Oxford University Press, 2016).

[22] How this works is spelled out in Christopher Cochrane, "Left/Right Ideology and Canadian Politics," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 43: 3 (2010), 583-605; Christopher Cochrane, *Left and Right: The Small World of Political Ideas*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill/Queen's University Press, 2015).

Thus by combining a critical approach to research on voters with a common sense reading of the consistent results produced in Canadian elections across space and time, it should be clear that voters are primarily voting for parties. As such, the voting system should be judged primarily by how well it facilitates what voters are trying to do. Here there is considerable evidence that the single member plurality voting system a) places barriers in the way of a significant number of voters being able to translate their support for different parties into representation, b) exhibits bias in the treatment of voters depending on their geographic locale, c) routinely distorts the representation of political parties in numerous ways, d) creates unnecessary strategic dilemmas for voters in making their vote choice, e) contributes to roughly half of the votes in any given election being 'wasted' or not contributing to the election of anyone, and f) unduly constrains party competition, particularly the emergence of new parties. By contrast, any proportional voting system would address and resolve these problems for voters and parties. A detailed treatment of the arguments and evidence sustaining these claims can be found in chapters 3, 4 and 8 of my book *The Politics of Voting: Reforming Canada's Electoral System* (chapter 8 appears in the appendix to this report).

What emerges from all this research is a clear demonstration of the inability of the single member plurality voting system to treat voters fairly in terms of a voter's 'power to elect.' This idea encompasses both the view that all votes should contribute to the election of something the elector prefers, if indeed their choice is popular enough with others to warrant representation, and that that power should be as equal as possible. Now in the Canadian context the courts have suggested that some limited departures from pure voter equality can be acceptable in under certain circumstances.[23] But here it bears noting that in making this allowance the courts still underlined that voter equality should remain the pre-eminent value in the Canadian electoral system and that departures from voter equality must be justified. In a similar vein the preference approach to voting system choice has argued that a host of issues must be added to concerns about representation in considering whether to change the voting system. But as they have failed to justify the importance of these concerns with compelling evidence or demonstrated they are important to voters that leaves representing what voters say with their votes as the main concern that should be taken into account in assessing how to reform the voting system in the Yukon.

3. Critically assessing referenda

It has become common in discussions of voting system reform for some participants to strongly assert that any proposal for changing the voting system must be submitted to the public in a referendum. Indeed, suggestions to the contrary are often met with an animated sense of shock and derision, the implication being that to proceed to change a voting system without a referendum would be obviously undemocratic.[24] Some have even gone so far as to claim that

[23] For a discussion of the court's findings, see David Johnson, "Canadian Electoral Boundaries and the Courts: Practices, Principles and Problems," *McGill Law Journal*, 39 (1994), 224-47.

[24] For instance, see Scott Reid, "Electoral Reform Must Go to a Referendum," *Ottawa Citizen*, December 28, 2015; and Tim Naumetz, "Conservative Party Sets Ultimatum for Electoral Reform: No Agreement Without Referendum," *The Hill Times*, October 14, 2016.

the recent trend in submitting voting system decisions to public referenda in the New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Canada has created a kind of constitutional 'convention' requiring their use going forward.[25] These responses are curious for a number of reasons. First, they demonstrate no awareness of the significant debates over the use of majoritarian decision rules when it comes to issues of representation. Second, they ignore the relevant historic contexts that have informed voting system choice in Canada and elsewhere, few of which involved referenda. Third, they fail to appreciate that partisan interests rather than normative values have decisively shaped the more recent referenda process in New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Canada. Fourth, they rely on assumptions about voters and how they cope with issue complexity that are not supported by the evidence of what we know voters actually do. Fifth, the position assumes a degree of value-based choice over voting systems occurring both in the present and the past that is not confirmed by actual historic and contemporary processes of voting system reform. Sixth, as many of the alternative values claimed to be relevant for the debate over voting systems have proven to be unfounded, it should be underlined that what referendum proponents are left calling for is a vote focused on issues of representation, defined primarily in terms of letting people choose more or less inclusion and fairness, a highly problematic position. Let's take up these concerns in more detail.

3.1 Majoritarian decision-rules and representation

The assumption that simply taking a vote makes any decision democratic ignores key debates in democratic theory and practice. In the context of modern polities it collapses two distinct but obviously related processes: how to represent the voting public and how that representative group should take decisions. While majoritarian approaches are recognized as valid in most cases for the latter they run into immediate problems with the former. To subject decisions about representation to majoritarian decision-rules risks allowing a majority to limit or exclude a minority from participation rather than simply defeating them on any decisions such a representative body might make. Democratic theorists would support the right of majorities to outvote minorities in most situations but would not support majorities using their majority voting power to limit or exclude minority representation itself.[26] Yet this has been a key battle in the struggle for fair and equitable representation across western countries over the last century. Here we can turn to the long history of American jurisprudence about the necessary limits of majoritarianism as regards minority voting rights, issues of voter suppression, and minority vote dilution, all of which culminated in the 1965 Voting Rights Act that attempted to prevent state legislatures from putting limits on minority voting rights, despite having majority

[25] See Patrice Dutil, "The Imperative of a Referendum," in Lydia Miljan (ed.), *Counting Votes: Essays on Electoral Reform*, (Vancouver: Fraser Institute, 2016), 81-103.

[26] For a sample of this broad debate, see Thomas Christiano, *The Rule of the Many: Fundamental Issues in Democratic Theory*, (New York: Routledge, 1996); Arend Lijphart, *Thinking About Democracy: Power Sharing and Majority Rule in Theory and Practice*, (New York: Routledge, 2008); and Carlo Invernizzi-Accetti, "Does Democratic Theory Need Epistemic Standards? Grounds for a Purely Procedural Defence of Majority Rule," *Democratic Theory*, 4:2 (2017), 3-26.

legislative support to do so.[27] The historic role of referenda in giving such exclusionary decisions a democratic veneer should also be highlighted, for instance, with the suppression of women's voting rights in Switzerland until 1972.[28] Thus the question of whether a referenda is the appropriate way to decide on a voting system choice depends on the character of the question that voting system reform is meant to address. If the view set out in this brief is accepted, namely that the issue of voting system reform is primarily about more or less fair and accurate representation, then it not clear that a referendum is normatively defensible as a way to make such a decision.

3.2 Voting system reform and referenda

Very few western countries have chosen their voting system by referendum, either in the past or more recent period. Looking at western Europe and Anglo-American countries between 1890 and 1990 only Switzerland adopted a proportional voting system this way in 1918, and it is a country with an unusually high use of referenda. Since 1985 France, Italy, Japan, and New Zealand all changed their voting systems, but only New Zealand used referenda to choose its new system.[29] In Canada, there have been ten instances of provincial voting system reform historically, all enacted by a legislative majority vote. Referenda have been used to change voting systems at the municipal level in Canada, though sporadically, and such processes have been subject to high levels of partisan manipulation, particularly from higher levels of government.[30]

It should also be noted that the insistence that referenda are now a necessary component of voting system reform processes introduces a different standard for reform than existed when such systems were first introduced. This represents a procedural inconsistency that should investigated to assess to what extent it may bias the reform process.

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[27] The political and legal struggle for minority voting and civil rights in the US is reviewed in Robert W. Mickey, "The Beginning of the End for Authoritarian Rule in America: Smith v. Allwright and the Abolition of the White Primary in the Deep South, 1944–1948," *Studies in American Political Development*, 22 (Fall 2008), 143–182. For the role of referenda as an instrument for the suppression of minority rights in the United States, see Barbara S. Gamble, "Putting Civil Rights to a Popular Vote," *American Journal of Political Science*, 41: 1 (January 1997), 245-269; and Sylvia R. Lazos Vargas, "Judicial Review of Initiatives and Referendums in which Majorities Vote on Minorities' Democratic Citizenship," *Ohio State Law Journal*, 60: 2 (1999), 399-556.

[28] For details of the Swiss experience, see Brigitte Studer, "Universal Suffrage and Direct Democracy : The Swiss Case, 1848-1990," in Christine Fauré (ed.), *Political and Historical Encyclopedia of Women*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 687-703.

[29] Details of these reform processes can be found in Pilon, *Wrestling with Democracy*.

[30] For a review of Vancouver's use of plebiscites as both a means to the elite imposition and prevention of voting system reform at the municipal level, see Dennis Pilon, "Democracy, BC-style," in Michael Howlett, Dennis Pilon and Tracy Summerville (eds.), *Politics and Government in British Columbia*, (Toronto: Emond Montgomery, 2010), specifically 92-3 and 96-99.

3.3 Normative versus partisan interests and referenda

The recent use of referenda to make decisions about voting system reform has been credited by some observers to long-term changes in political culture across western countries, specifically a general 'decline of deference' on the part of voting publics to defer to politicians and experts, as well as positive evidence of a shift in institutional responses to public demands for greater consultation and democratic input. So choosing a voting system by referendum tends to be characterized by academics and public commentators alike as a normatively good thing, both giving the public what it wants and demonstrating institutional responsiveness. The problem is that such characterizations can only be sustained by ignoring the actual political processes that moved political elites to use referenda for these purposes and the clearly partisan and self-interested motives that shaped their use.

In New Zealand it was the government-appointed Royal Commission that first recommended the government use a referendum process to consider a change in its voting system but their report and recommendations were shelved by the government that sponsored them. The promise to hold the referendum only emerged by accident in a televised debate where the Prime Minister misread his notes, offering something he and his party were actually opposed to. When his re-elected government then failed to act on the promise, the opposition took up the issue. When they came to power they did initiate a referendum process but critics complained that the governing party tried to rig it to fail, opting for an initial indicative ballot they hoped would either prove inconclusive or confuse voters and then a final vote between one option and the status quo that could benefit from the status quo bias in most referendums.[31] That these tactics did not ultimately work in this case does not negate their bad faith intent.

In British Columbia, a 'wrong winner' election result in 1996 created pressure within the opposition BC Liberal party to commit to voting system reform. When they came to power in 2001 the government commissioned a third party to produce a model process to publicly evaluate the voting system and recommend alternatives, if need be, that would then be subject to a public referendum. But perhaps learning from New Zealand experience or drawing from his experience with voting system reform at the municipal level in BC, Premier Campbell added a number of conditions to the referendum process, most crucially a super-majority rule for any new system to be successfully adopted. Thus despite gaining nearly 58% of the popular vote, 5% more than the winning referendum in New Zealand had achieved, the 2005 BC referendum result was declared a failure.[32] Subsequent provincial referenda on the voting system in Ontario, PEI and again in BC in 2009 kept BC's initial barrier to reform and added new ones, like regulations in Ontario preventing political parties from participating in the referendum process, or PEI's last minute changes to their referenda rules in 2005 and their repudiation of the

[31] See Keith Jackson and Alan McRobie, *New Zealand Adopts Proportional Representation: Accident? Design? Evolution? (*Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 1998).

[32] See Dennis Pilon, "Assessing Gordon Campbell's Uneven Democratic Legacy in British Columbia," in Tracy Summerville and Jason Lacharite (eds.), *The Campbell Revolution? Power, Politics and Policy in British Columbia from 2001 to 2011*, (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 37-60.

successful reform vote in 2016.[33] However, BC's third provincial referendum in 2018, sponsored by an NDP provincial government with support from the Green party, actually reversed some of the more egregious and arbitrary barriers to reform, like the super-majority rule previously in place, creating what was the most fair and balanced referendum process the country had seen up to then.[34] Yet despite these welcome changes, reformers still faced an uneven playing field for reasons having to do with various built-in biases associated with referenda, that will explored in more detail below.

3.4. Voters, issue complexity and referenda

Claims that a referendum must be used to decide any change in voting system rely on a host of assumptions about voters, specifically that they have defined views about voting system choices and that they are keen to be involved in the decision-making process. But such claims are not supported by what we know about how voters have reacted to the choices and opportunities presented in previous voting system referenda. Basically, most voters know little about voting systems or any other political institutions for that matter. This is really not surprising given the public's low level engagement with them. This creates a problem because to justify the use of referenda to make key decisions on matters of public policy there must be a realistic likelihood that the public will be able to become informed on the choices under consideration. Some have argued that public education campaigns or increased media attention could change this but the evidence from recent experience with referenda and voting systems in Canada and the United Kingdom suggests that such an outcome is highly unlikely for a number of reasons. First, conventional print and broadcast media have proven either unable or unwilling to act as a deliberative public forum for the issue, failing to provide effective coverage or a fair and balanced treatment of the different sides.[35] Second, government information campaigns and funding to civil society groups have not led to improved outcomes in terms of voter knowledge. Instead they have typically just added to the noise surrounding the campaigns.[36] Finally, these efforts do not realistically connect with how most voters typically cope with issue complexity. It is this latter point that is most revealing about how and why referenda are both inappropriate and largely superfluous in making voting system choices.

The image of the ideal voter that is often touted or implied in political science textbooks and media is one that is informed and actively weighing the pros and cons of different policies. But in reality most voters know little about any specific policies. Thus when faced with a complex

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[33] See Dennis Pilon, "Voting Systems and Party Politics," in Alain-G. Gagnon and A. Brian Tanguay (eds.), *Canadian Parties in Transition: Recent Trends and New Paths for Research, 4th edition,* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 217-49.

[34] See Dennis Pilon, "BC's Eminently Fair Referendum Process," *Vancouver Sun*, August 17, 2018.

[35] See Dennis Pilon, "Investigating Media as a Deliberative Space: Newspaper Opinions about Voting Systems in the 2007 Ontario Provincial Referendum," *Canadian Political Science Review*, 3: 3 (September 2009), 1-23; and Alan Renwick and Michael Lamb, "The Quality of Referendum Debate: The UK's Electoral System Referendum in the Print Media," *Electoral Studies*, 32: 2 (June 2013), 294-304.

[36] See Lawrence Leduc, "The Failure of Electoral Reform Proposals in Canada," *Political Science*, 61:2 (December 2009), 21-40; and Holly Ann Garnett, "Lessons Learned: Referendum Resource Officers and the 2007 Ontario Referendum on Electoral Reform," *Canadian Political Science Review*, 8: 1 (2014), 63-84.

and confusing topic voters may simply ignore the issue or choose to drop out of participating, which is one reason why participation in referenda is often lower than in general elections. Another response is the well documented 'conservative bias' in public responses to referenda questions. Basically, when faced with an issue the voter knows little about, and in the absence of reliable cues about how to respond to the issue from civil society or political parties, there is a tendency amongst voters to simply vote 'no'.[37] Another response from voters in these circumstances is to use what analysts call 'information shortcuts' to compensate for their low levels of information on any given topic. These often amount to using their political party choice as a proxy for doing their own research on policy issues, though high profile civil society organizations can also play this role.[38] For instance, in the 2005 BC voting system referendum the province's political parties did not weigh in officially on the issue, thus giving their supporters little clear public direction about how to decide. In the absence of party cues many voters used the Citizens' Assembly recommendation in favour of a new voting system, essentially deciding to 'trust' them even though research suggested that the public understood very little about how the new system might work.[39] By 2018 party choice had become the key factor influencing support or opposition to voting system reform in BC, with 'no' support in the referendum closely correlated with the BC Liberal party strength in the previous provincial election.[40] The irony here is that referenda were supposed to allow voters to decide on voting system choices, not political parties. But the reality is that, in practical terms, voter choices in these referenda really amount to reflected political party positions as voters primarily take their direction about how to vote from the party they support, suggesting the referendum process is both an enormous waste of time and money.

Some have tried to dismiss these concerns about voting system referenda, arguing that if voters can work out which party to support they can also work out which voting system they prefer. But a considerable amount of research suggests that choosing a political party to support is a qualitatively different challenge for voters than weighing in on the details of a policy area. The former allows a voter to bring multiple experiences and values to bear in linking their approach to politics to a particular political party. Research shows that while voters may not use terms

[37] For an overview of these issues see Alan Renwick, "Referendums," in Kai Arzheimer, Jocelyn Evans, Michael S. Lewis-Beck (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Electoral Behaviour*, (Los Angeles: Sage, 2017).

[38] See Cheryl Boudreau and Arthur Lupia, "Political Knowledge," in James N. Druckman, Donald P. Green, James H. Kuklinski, and Arthur Lupia (eds.), *Cambridge Handbook of Experimental Political Science*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 171-83; and Arthur Lupia, *Uninformed: Why People Know So Little about Politics and What We Can Do About it*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[39] See Fred Cutler and Richard Johnston, with R. Kenneth Carty, André Blais, and Patrick Fournier, "Deliberation, Information, and Trust: The BC Citizens' Assembly as Agenda Setter," in M. Warren and H. Pearse (eds.), *Designing Deliberative Democracy: The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 166-91.

[40] This shift from using the BCCA as a cue for voting in 2005 to more traditional partisan cues was apparent in the 2009 BC referendum campaign, though political party responses to the issue were still somewhat muted publicly. However by 2018 BC's three main parties had clear public positions on the choice of voting system, with the BC Liberals actively campaigning against change and working closely with various civil society groups opposing reform. For a comparison of the 2005 and 2009 campaigns, see "The 2005 and 2009 Referenda on Voting System Change in British Columbia," *Canadian Political Science Review*, 4: 2-3 (June-September 2010), 73-89.

like 'right' and 'left' they nevertheless are capable of identifying which parties are closest to the issues they care about. And, as noted, once linked to a party on the basis of certain policies and values, voters may extend that connection to a level of trust where they look to the party for direction on policies the voter is not acquainted with. By contrast, weighing in on a policy debate is a much greater challenge for voters. Now, instead of being able to convert their own experience and values into a means of connecting with a party, they must engage with narrow and specific expert knowledge about a topic they likely know nothing about, a daunting and alienating experience for most voters. This is why voters use information shortcuts and proxies to cope with such issue complexity and information deficits.[41]

What needs to be recognized is that the push for referenda on voting systems is not really coming from voters but from political partisans with a clear stake in the outcome. And in the same way that the choices in voting system referenda are mostly just a reflection of the political party position of a voter's preferred party, so too are 'public' demands for voting system referendums typically motivated and mobilized by partisan forces. In the Canadian context we can see that right-wing think tanks like the Fraser Institute, the Frontier Centre, and the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, along with the federal Conservative party, have made the most strident demands for referenda and attempted to give credence to the view that the use of referenda for voting system choice has become a kind of 'convention.'[42] And they do so primarily because they see referenda as the most reliable way to defeat such initiatives. Here, despite public claims to the contrary, their reasons are clearly self-interest. Research shows that conservative parties tend to be advantaged by the use single member plurality voting systems as compared to proportional ones.[43]

3.5 Values and voting system choice

Normatively, the focus on using referenda to choose voting systems is justified in the broader preference approach to the topic by recourse to their claim that different voting systems embody different values, with the implication that different countries use different systems because they value different things. As such, any change of voting system should also reflect a change in values, and the best way to register and confirm that is through a referendum. But the claim that values have determined voting system choices is not supported by any historical or contemporary evidence. The earliest western voting system reforms (e.g. Belgium 1899, Finland 1906, Sweden 1907) were designed to sustain conservative regimes in the face of challenges from both democratic and non-democratic challengers. A second wave of voting

[41] See Arthur Lupia and Mathew D. McCubbins, *The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They Need to Know?* (Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Arthur Lupia, *Uninformed: Why People Know So Little About Politics and What We Can Do About It*, (Oxford University Press, 2016).

[42] See Tim Naumetz, "Conservative Party Sets Ultimatum for Electoral Reform: No Agreement Without Referendum," *The Hill Times*, October 14, 2016; and Lydia Miljan (ed.), *Counting Votes: Essays on Electoral Reform*, (Vancouver: Fraser Institute, 2016).

[43] On the tendency of single member plurality to favour conservative parties, see Holger Döring and Philip Manow, "Is Proportional Representation More Favourable to the Left? Electoral Rules and Their Impact on Elections, Parliaments and the Formation of Cabinets," *British Journal of Political Science*, 47:1 (January 2017), 149-64.

system reform emerged around World War I (Denmark 1915, Netherlands 1917, Germany 1918, Switzerland 1918, France 1919, Austria 1919, Norway 1919, Italy 1919) as western countries faced demands to more fully open up their political systems, specifically to working class influence. Again, voting system reform emerged largely as a conservative measure in an attempt to limit this new mass influence. Thus the 'values' undergirding the choice of new voting systems historically was partisan self-interest, defined largely in class and anti-democratic terms.[44] A similar self-interest dynamic informed the voting system reforms adopted and discarded in the Canadian context as well, with farmers in Alberta and Manitoba adopting hybrid voting systems in the 1920s that inflated their support while assuring division amongst their opponents, and a Liberal-Conservative coalition in BC introduced a majority voting system in 1952 explicitly designed to favour the governing parties.[45] More recent reforms do not depart from this script, with changes in voting systems in France, Italy, Japan, and New Zealand largely motivated by party system instability and party self-interest.[46]

In the same way that the historic introduction of proportional voting systems in western countries was not an expressions of values (other than political self-interest) it is hard to find any countries 'choosing' single member plurality under conditions that appear democratic. Instead single member plurality is typically imposed on jurisdictions by colonial powers or upper levels of government or simply held in place by non-democratic elites as they concede some demands for democratic inclusion.[47] But where a western polity is adopting a voting system and no political competitors have an embedded or structural advantage, no one adopts single member plurality. In fact, not a single one of the re-democratizing European nations in the 1970s (e.g. Greece, Spain, Portugal) or the post-Soviet and post Yugoslavian regimes in the 1990s or the devolved assemblies in the United Kingdom opted for a plurality system.[48] It is also

[44] See Pilon, *Wrestling with Democracy*, chapters 3 ("Prologue to the Democratic Era") and 4 ("Facing the Democratic Challenge, 1900-1918").

[45] See Dennis Pilon, "Explaining Voting System Reform in Canada: 1874 to 1960," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 40: 3 (Autumn 2006), 135-61. Some scholars have argued that Canadian reforms were the simply the product of specifically western Canadian progressive influence in the World War I era rather than political party self-interest but such explanations tend to ignore the timing of the reforms and fail to account for cases at different levels of government. For a sense of this debate see Jack Lucas, "Reaction or Reform? Subnational Evidence on P.R. Adoption from Canadian Cities," *Representation*, 56: 1 (2020), 89–109; and Dennis Pilon, "Reform *and* Reaction: Voting System Reform in Canadian Cities: A Response to Lucas," *Representation*, 57: 4 (2021), 551-9.

[46] See Pilon, *Wrestling with Democracy*, chapter 7 ("The Neoliberal Democratic Realignment, 1970-2000").

[47] For instance, Blais and Massicotte highlight the strong association of former British colonies with the use of plurality voting systems. See Andre Blais and Louis Massicotte, "Electoral Formulas: A Macroscopic Perspective," *European Journal of Political Research*, 32 (1997), 107–129. For American historical manipulation of plurality electoral systems, particularly over the partisan imposition of single versus multi-member districts, see Erik J. Engstrom, *Partisan Gerrymandering and the Construction of American Democracy*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

[48] For a review of voting system adoptions in most of these countries, see the relevant chapters in Josep Colomer, *Handbook of Electoral System Choice*, (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). For Portugal, see David Corkill, "The Political System and the Consolidation of Democracy in Portugal," *Parliamentary Affairs*, 46: 4 (October 1993), 517-33. For eastern Europe, see Sarah Birch, *Electoral Systems and Political Transformation in Post-Communist Europe*, (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). For UK experience in Scotland specifically, see Alan Convery and Thomas Carl Lundberg, "Rational Choice Meets the New Politics: Choosing the Scottish Parliament's Electoral System," *Government and Opposition*, 55 (2020), 114–129.

worthwhile to note that countries that shift away from single member plurality seldom shift back, except under conditions where one party is in a position to force a change through because they have a legislative majority. This was the case in the three Canadian provinces using hybrid semi-proportional and majority voting systems in the 1950s.[49]

3.6 The problem of 'choosing' unfairness

The preference model suggested that selecting a voting system involved choosing from amongst a number of competing but equally valid values that represented trade-offs e.g. one could have more proportional results for parties but it would come at the expense of single party majority governments, and depending on which result voters valued more they could make their choice accordingly. But in examining what actually occurs in both SMP and PR countries, it was established that most of the claimed competing values could not be shown to be either factually true or important to voters. Instead, by examining what voters actually do when voting and the kind of results that they consistently produce, as well the consistent legislative behaviour that results from these voting patterns, it was demonstrated that elections are really about party choices. That left only representation and the question of voter equality and equity standing as defensible qualities to be considered in deciding on a voting system choice. Is such a choice really amenable to being decided in a referendum? In a 2017 op/ed for the *Vancouver Sun* published before the BC government had committed to putting the voting system issue to a referendum I asked people to think about this way:

> "You arrive at your neighbour's house for a friendly game of cards, but at the door he tells you the other players have decided you will have to score twice as many points as anyone else to win the game. It's all above board, he tells you, because most of the players voted in favour of the rule. But is this way of making the rules fair? Of course not. No one would agree to play a game on such terms. And yet this is basically the argument from those who say that B.C. cannot have a more democratic voting system without putting it to a public vote."[50]

In the card game example the fact that the other players voted to saddle one player with an unfair rule doesn't make the decision 'democratic.' So too voting system referendum proponents argue that if enough people endorse a demonstrably less accurate and fair voting system that makes the decision democratic. This is a faulty logic, based on a serious misreading of what voters are trying to do when they vote and how such knowledge should be brought to bear on the the design of political institutions connected to representation.

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[49] See Dennis Pilon, "Explaining Voting System Reform in Canada: 1874 to 1960," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 40: 3 (Autumn 2006), 135-61.In fact, no western countries have shifted back from a proportional to any kind of majoritarian voting system, barring France (an outlier to these trends). The reasons for French exceptionalism on this are reviewed in detail in Pilon, *Wrestling with Democracy*.

[50] See Dennis Pilon, "Change the Voting System Without a Referendum," *Vancouver Sun*, May 29, 2017.

Conclusion

In recent Canadian experience the choice of a voting system has been presented as one involving an assessment of the alleged values informing them and then selecting one based on an individual's preference for this or that particular value or values. The process is basically neutral on the choices, according them all democratic legitimacy in the name of pluralistic tolerance and the fact that the choosing has involved the public via referenda. But, as has been argued here, this approach is fundamentally misguided: misinformed about its basic claims, wrongheaded in its understanding of what the problem is that should be addressed, and ultimately undemocratic in its process and outcomes. The values that the dominant preference approach to voting system reform claimed were valid considerations in assessing and choosing a voting system – simplicity, stability, representation, and accountability – were all shown to be without empirical foundation. The problem voting system reform should be addressing is not how to frame a public debate and decision based on a consideration of these alleged competing values but to uncover what voters are actually trying to do in elections and then assess what institutional processes will best allow them to do it. With that knowledge in hand, putting the final decision to a referendum is both unnecessary and undemocratic. It basically amounts to giving voters a chance to 'choose' inequality and unfairness, hardly a very democratic option.

To sum, voting system processes in Canada have been dominated by a preference approach that is without credibility and ultimately undemocratic in its processes and outcomes. What the Yukon needs is a voting system reform approach that takes advancing the democratic substance of its electoral institutions as its goal. The way to proceed then is to establish what Yukon voters are trying to do when voting and adapt the electoral institutions to facilitate that. The values undergirding such a process should be limited to those that can be established as demonstrably valid for democratic circumstance i.e. maximizing voter equality, equity and inclusion. As the evidence is overwhelming that voters vote party, from both an academic and common sense appreciation of the pattern of elections results over time and place, the priority for reformers should be getting more accurate and fair results for the party choices voters are making. The process of best matching electoral institutions to the needs of voters is not an exercise in deciding amongst competing values but a factual/analytical one, involving a comparison of voting system performance with what can be demonstrated that voters are trying to do when they vote. To then submit the results of such an analysis to a referenda is to suggest that retaining a voting system that does not match the needs of voters is acceptable. But from a democratic standpoint of maximizing inclusion, voter equality and voter equity, it clearly is not.

Thus I recommend the committee act on what we know Yukon voters are trying to do when voting and assess the voting system choices on that basis, offering a clear decision between the two broad families of voting systems e.g. winner-take-all (plurality, majority, semi-proportional) and proportional representation (party list, single transferable vote, mixed-member proportional). In the event the committee supports a change from the present territorial voting system, the precise details of a more proportional alternative could then be informed with input and direction from the public before being adopted by the legislature.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Debating Voting-System Effects

Introduction

A lot of things are claimed about voting systems, most of them debatable. The debates involve why countries use the systems they do, how the systems work, what kinds of results they typically produce, and what might happen to a country—say Canada—if the voting system were changed. While most of these issues have already been addressed in this book in one form or another, it is useful to bring them together in one chapter to compare their contrasting logic and evidence, particularly as these comprise the "greatest hits" of the voting-system debates. The debates tend to take two forms, one focused on values and the other focused on performance. Academics have fostered the values discussion (characterized as a choice between adversarial or consensual systems, or majoritarian or proportional models), while a much broader group—including academics, politicians, pundits, activists, citizens, etc.—have commented on voting-system performance in various ways. This chapter will review the classic debate points about voting systems, particularly questions of stability, local representation, and government accountability, to critically assess their validity. It will also take up some of the newer issues attached to voting-system-reform campaigns, such as their potential impact on voter turnout and styles of political engagement, in an effort to separate defendable from indefensible positions.

The Debate About Values

In their 2002 discussion paper, the Law Commission of Canada stated that "[c]hoosing a voting system is about choosing between different values" (LCC 2002: 29). It has become commonplace in most political-science texts and public processes to begin a discussion of voting systems with a consideration of values. Typically, we are encouraged to reflect on the values that we think should underlie a democratic voting system, and helpful prompts are usually provided in the form of values we should consider—

values like the quality of representation, government performance and accountability, local representation, and so on (LCC 2002; BC-CA 2004; Watling 2006).

Most political scientists go further and claim that the kind of voting system in use in a given country is itself a reflection of larger social and political values, the implication being that the system was adopted to facilitate the expression of such values (Katz 1997; Lijphart 1999a). Specifically, they claim that SMP countries favour or embody an adversarial political culture while PR-using countries reflect a more consensual approach to politics. In the values paradigm, the debate over voting systems is both a discussion about what we value and would like to see in a representative system and an assessment of what we think the larger cultural values are that animate politics in our particular locale. Thus reform involves a compromise between individual and collective values vis-à-vis politics. All this sounds very balanced, but the privileging of values as the key determinant in voting-system choice is usually asserted rather than defended. The fact that we might want an approach to voting-system reform that is driven by values does not mean that values have driven or will drive the process of changing actual voting systems. If values are not the root causes of change, we may be misplacing our efforts and wasting our time.

The currently dominant "values" approach to examining and appraising voting systems is deeply problematic for at least three reasons. First, when political scientists and public processes begin with values, they may simply reproduce a dominant and largely unquestioned view in North American society that all political institutions and political results have their origins in public values and choices. This has a host of implications, not the least of which is foreclosing important lines of research that may prove crucial to the process of voting-system reform. If all political results are the unproblematic product of public wants, then there is no need to examine just how various arrangements have come about or why various efforts at change have succeeded or failed. Such ready-made, all-purpose answers prevent the public and experts alike from applying insights from past experience to the present.

This relates to the second problem with the values approach, which is that it is factually incorrect, both historically and in contemporary settings. Historical work on voting-system reform demonstrates that political institutions in modern societies were influenced by political interests, not values, and formed largely without input from citizens. In the case of Britain, and by extension in the cases of the Anglo-American colonies it influenced, the voting system was not so much the product of a grand design as the result of an ongoing process of pragmatic tinkering and accommodation to shifting political interests (Hart 1992; Pilon 2005). In the case of western Europe, the countries adopting PR could hardly be characterized as being driven by "consensual" values in designing their voting systems. In fact, most were riven with such serious political divisions that potential civil war and revolution were actually the key impetuses to voting-system reform. In Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, and Belgium (among others), the end of World War I was accompanied by street demonstrations and an increase in radical political demands (Pilon 2002, 2005). So there is little support for sweeping claims that adversarial versus consensual social values somehow led to the adoption of different voting systems in the past. In fact, the causal arrows might run

the other way. If such societies appear either adversarial or consensual today, that may have less to do with values than with the long-term effects of the voting system pushing politics toward either conflict or compromise. Meanwhile, contemporary survey work demonstrates that voting systems have remained largely unquestioned not because they enjoy support, but because most people remain unaware of them or their workings. Indeed, analysis of voters' knowledge of Canada's plurality system has demonstrated that many do not grasp the basic workings and implications of the system (Bricker and Refern 2001). Voters can hardly be credited with authoring a system that most do not understand.

Finally, the values approach limits critical inquiry into key tenets of the voting-system debate by converting analytical questions into value considerations ("do we like local representation?" rather than "is local representation demonstrably important to the political system?") and by flattening all values relativistically (thus "diverse representation" and "majority government" are equally valid "values" in choosing a democratic voting system). A more critical approach would argue that an analysis of the real workings of our institutions and their political implications should precede any consideration of the values we think we may want in a voting system. Furthermore, a critical stance would argue that not all values are equal when it comes to evaluating the implications of different voting systems; democratic values should be given priority. In fact, some "values"—like getting a majority government from a minority of the votes—may not be normatively defensible at all by democratic standards.

The currently fashionable values approach is a barrier to change. It obscures the political contestation that has been central to historical and contemporary episodes of voting-system change while misdirecting public and elite attention toward factors with no demonstrable influence on the process. Pragmatically, such an approach will contribute to the failure of reform initiatives and a disillusionment of the participants, particularly the public.

The Debate About Performance

The bulk of detailed debate over voting systems typically concerns their alleged performance. Great claims are made about the effects that will flow from one model, while dire assessments are offered about another. We have reviewed the deficiencies of the plurality system and the positive aspects of PR in previous chapters. Now let us reverse the approach, critically assessing the alleged positive aspects of plurality and the common complaints made against PR systems. In doing so, we will be responding to the discussion as it is commonly framed in Canada. In a nutshell, the plurality system—while perhaps less representative—is defended for its stability, for its tendency to create majority governments, for linking voters to a particular representative, and for allegedly giving voters the final say on government formation. PR, by contrast, is said to create political instability, constant minority government, and a lack of accountability, both in terms of a local representative and government formation. In this section, we'll explore these competing claims about plurality and PR.

Plurality's Alleged Strengths

There are four key pillars in the defence of plurality voting: simplicity, a tendency to produce stable majority government, accountability of a local member to a geographic constituency, and the ability of voters to hold the government to account and potentially "throw the rascals out." These four factors are typically highlighted in public debates over voting systems as compelling and convincing arguments in favour of plurality voting. Let's take each in turn.

SIMPLICITY

Plurality has long been defended for its simplicity and transparency for voters and election officers alike. Voters need only examine the ballot, find the name they wish to support, and mark an "X" in the space provided. At the conclusion of voting day, election officers need only empty the ballot box, divide the ballots by the markings made upon them, and declare the most popular candidate the winner. Such voting instructions are easy for voting officials to communicate and fairly readily understood by voters, regardless of their level of education or political sophistication. Adding up the results with such a system can also be quickly mastered and executed, even by novice electoral officers. This is generally what is meant by the "simplicity" of the plurality voting system and, understood in these terms, there can be little doubt that the claims are true. Barring any good reasons to count votes another way, simplicity in voting process and administration seems like a good thing. Furthermore, proponents argue that such simplicity is key to voter confidence in the system as the administration of the vote is very transparent—basically anyone can follow the logic of the ballot markings and the ballot-counting process.

But there are two flaws in the "simplicity" defences of plurality voting. On the one hand, the characterization of plurality's simplicity is one-sided, attending only to the acts involved with voter administration. The simplicity of a voting system and the transparency of its results should not be limited to voting and ballot counting but should extend to the results produced by the system as a whole. And here, plurality is anything but simple and transparent. In fact, nearly half of voters do not understand that a victorious "majority" government seldom represents an actual majority of voters (Bricker and Redfern 2001). Few voters can explain why there is nearly always a gap between the percentage of votes cast for parties and the percentage of seats they win. Thus in terms of the election results, rather than in terms of the election administration, plurality is one of the least transparent systems.

On the other hand, even if one values simplicity in voting and vote counting, to what extent should that commitment be adhered to in the face of competing and perhaps more compelling needs and values? To suggest the need for simplicity must trump everything else is not a compelling argument for a number of reasons. First, there is little support for the view that voters cannot handle more complex voting systems. In fact, most voters in western countries already do (Farrell 2001: 202–3). Second, as the voting results are a kind of political communication, the simplicity and transparency of those results is arguably much more important than having simple

vote-counting methods. Finally, few voters attend to the workings of the plurality system, despite its simplicity, so it is false to claim that this simplicity is key to its legitimacy and to the accepted legitimacy of its results. In practice, the public's sense of the legitimacy of our institutions has more to do with the behaviour of political actors and the media. If political elites are concerned about the system and its results, that serves as a cue for public concerns as well. Thus it follows that how political elites respond to any alternative method of voting will also prove more important than whether voters can follow all aspects of the vote count.

In the end, the simplicity arguments are often disingenuous. Our political elites have proven only too willing to embrace complexity when it has served their interests, whether we are discussing voting systems or a host of other topics. As political scientist Jean-Pierre Derriennic has noted, the same politicians who claim to be able to explain the complexity of free-trade agreements to voters nonetheless throw up their hands at the prospect of working with alternative voting systems—despite the fact the potential results from the latter are far less uncertain than those of the former (Derriennic 2005). And any serious political operative understands that it is the role of organized political forces—be they parties or interest groups—to signal to the public that they should be concerned about a particular complex political institution from time to time. That leaves appeals to simplicity operating on the level of fear and ignorance, as elites attempt to exploit what people don't know in order to keep in place what seems familiar, for reasons other than those publicly stated.

STABILITY AND MAJORITY GOVERNMENT

If the simplicity arguments amount to an insincere appeal from people who know better, a great deal more effort goes into the defence of plurality as the voting system that best assures stability and the likelihood of majority government. Basically, those who argue for plurality on the basis of stability and majority government believe that stability in governing is crucial to the well-being of a country, and that the best way to secure that is through the election of a single-party majority government. Though the "majority" is often based on less than a majority of the popular vote, proponents nonetheless argue that this is an acceptable trade-off given the benefits that ultimately accrue to the governed.

In this scenario, a party can develop a coherent program and, if they win a majority of seats, can be assured of having the legislative ability to see the program introduced in its entirety. Such a government can also focus more on the long-term interests of the country because their legislative majority allows them to introduce changes that, while temporarily unpopular, might prove to be in the nation's interests at some time in the future. By implication, the lack of single-party majority government would mean a lack of coherence in policy, confusion about what the government is doing or can accomplish, a watering down of their agenda, and an inability to administer strong and unpopular medicine to the people for their own good. In the end, proponents argue that voters themselves approve of such majority government arguments because, according to the polls, Canadians express a preference for majority government over

minority government. The need for "majority government" is probably the most common defence of plurality.

If we turn to the evidence, there is no doubt that plurality does tend to result in legislative majority governments where it is used. The United Kingdom produced 21 majority governments from 26 elections over the course of the 20th century. In Canada, too, plurality has produced many majority governments, though with less frequency than plurality's defenders might admit. From the breakdown of Canada's traditional 19th-century two-party system in 1921 until 2006, 10 out of 26 elections have resulted in a minority government, despite constant adherence to plurality voting. Interestingly, this debate is irrelevant in one of the last major countries still using plurality, the United States, because their Congressional system does not utilize the parliamentary notion of responsible government. In fact, the behaviour of the US Congress often looks to be the opposite of the claims made for plurality regimes; in that system, there is no guarantee that either the executive or legislative branch can assure passage of legislation, even with a nominal majority in the different chambers.

Of course, the fact that plurality voting tends to produce legislative majority governments does not necessarily prove that such governments are in fact more stable than minority governments or coalition governments. A lot depends on how we define stability. Some would argue that the policy swings typical under plurality—that Party X comes to power and removes Party Y's policies only to see the opposite occur when Party Y returns to office—are highly unstable. Nor are the alleged benefits from plurality's "stability" well documented. A clear example of this can be seen in the 1990s at the provincial level in Ontario and BC. Ontario lurched from Liberal to NDP to Conservative government in just three elections, with wide swings on policy accompanying each change in office. In BC, the old-right Socreds were displaced by the left NDP, who were then defeated by the new-right Liberals. Any gains produced by the dramatic shifts in policy under each "majority" government seem dubious and difficult to quantify. On the other hand, many of the alleged problems with minority government under plurality have less to do with the fact that the governments are minorities than with the incentive structure of the voting system itself. Because plurality exaggerates the support of the biggest vote-getter, it creates an incentive for a minority government to go back to the polls (Dobell 2000). Minority governments in PR systems do not face the same incentives and as such do not "destabilize" as readily as under plurality.

The biggest problem with the "majority government" arguments that are utilized to defend plurality voting is that, unwittingly or otherwise, they rest on fundamentally undemocratic values. For instance, the obsession with stability—despite all evidence to the contrary about the stability of coalition and minority governments in western societies—suggests either a lack of faith in democratic deliberation or an unwillingness to abide by genuine majority decision making. No one wishes for "unstable" government, but in a democracy instability is factored into the design because people are supposed to be allowed to disagree. To sacrifice all other claims of democratic legitimacy to the need for stability is not healthy for a democratic society. There are other models of government that make stability the overarching principle (dictatorship, fascism, etc.), but it is not democracy and nor should it be.

The other defences of majority government are just variations on this undemocratic riff, whether we are talking about the paternalism of the view that says that governments must be empowered to act against the wishes of their populations "for their own good" or about the anti-majoritarism behind the view that popular minorities who get a majority of seats via the voting system should be able to introduce policies that a majority of people don't want. Such views violate one of the most basic assumptions of democratic theory—that is, that majority rule is the defining characteristic of the decision rule in democracy. The most telling problem with the majority government argument is that there has never been anything stopping a majority of people from voting for the same party, either now or in the past. The fact that they seldom do is actually a crucial piece of information in a democratic society, one that we shouldn't allow our so-called democratic institutions to obscure.

The attempt to shore up support for plurality's inflated majority governments by suggesting that the public prefers majority to minority government is also suspect on at least two counts. First, it is not clear that people are saying they approve of such results with the answers they provide in opinion surveys. In some cases, the wording of the questions in the polling that bolsters this view is unclear or unclear in its implications. For instance, recall that most voters are confused about the results produced by plurality voting, with nearly 50% mistaking legislative majorities for popular-vote majorities (Bricker and Redfern 2001). For such voters, the question "do you support majority government" is absurd because, in their view, our majority governments *do* result from majority support. The obverse implications of such a question would be "do you think that a majority vote should result in a minority government?"—clearly an absurd outcome.

On the other hand, the question—even if properly understood—is stated unclearly because it focuses on wants or desires rather than on anticipated results. I may like the idea of majority government—for my party—but such a view is divorced from the fact of whether it is likely that my party will gain a majority. It is telling that when the question is rephrased away from desires and toward outcomes, the results of polling are very different. For instance, when asked whether the voting system should award seats to parties in proportion to the votes they receive—which is just another way of describing PR—64% of respondents said "yes" (Bricker and Redfern 2001). This would appear to counter glib attempts to marshal public opinion behind phony majority governments. Of course, even if a majority of voters thought that distorted election outcomes were OK, that would not necessarily be a strong argument in favour of such governments. While most democratic theory accepts majority rule as a way to make decisions about specific policies, process and representation issues cannot be subjected to the same decision-making approach. If they were, 51% of the voters could decide to disenfranchise the other 49%—hardly a democratic outcome.

LOCAL REPRESENTATION

Aside from majority government, another common defence of plurality voting is that it maintains a strong local link in terms of representation. Many participants in the

voting-system debate, both pro and con, accept the view that local representation is a key part of Canadian politics and is much valued by individual Canadian voters. Indeed, one reformer claimed that any new voting system would need to maintain single-member ridings because Canadians "would be unlikely to accept an electoral system that deprived them of having a single MP to represent them" (Milner 1999: 41). The local representative is defended as a crucial link between voters and the political system, one that allows individuals to seek help and redress of grievances that involve government while also allowing voters to hold someone—in this case, the individual local politician—accountable for what is going on in the provincial or federal capital. There are a host of academics and politicians who underline these two key local functions, arguing that the local link serves to provide incentives for politicians to maintain a presence in the communities they claim to represent. Furthermore, they worry that any change to the voting system that would eliminate this local factor, or even just diminish it, would endanger the quality of Canadian democracy (assessed critically in Pearse 2005).

The broad acceptance of local representation as a key component of Canadian democracy is surprising, as much of the current "debate" represents a triumph of assertion over argument. Proponents of local representation insist it is crucial to Canadian politics but seldom bother to mount a serious case to defend it. Even where serious academic work *does* focus on the local, it tends to highlight local effects in political campaigning (i.e., spending money or organizing locally) rather than argue that locality and specifically local concerns are the basis upon which voters make their choice on election day (Carty and Eagles 2005). When we turn to the evidence, the case for the importance of the local member in our political system quickly crumbles.

Whether we are talking about representation or accountability in our political system, the local realm doesn't really matter that much. The representation that a local member can give voters amounts to a rather mediocre ombuds-service—help with getting a passport or getting the attention of a government bureaucrat. On the other hand, if local voters want to talk policy they are going to run into a problem unless their MP's political views line up with theirs. This means that many local people—usually between 40 and 60% of them—can forget having any influence over the legislative voting decisions of their local politician. Nor is the alleged accountability of local representation all that substantive. The ideal would have it that voters elect a member and then re-elect or defeat that member based on their assessment of that member's behaviour. But whether a member gets elected or re-elected is more crucially dependent on the competitive party situation in her riding than on shifting voter opinion. For instance, a candidate in a competitive three-cornered contest might win with 35% of the vote. In the next election, that candidate may get more support but still lose if support for the third party falls. In this scenario, the losing candidate's loss may represent less the voters' verdict about her individual performance than the arbitrary results of the voting system's workings. More generally, Canada has a particularly high turnover in terms of our elected members, which academics credit to swings in party support rather than voter judgments of local politicians (Docherty 1997: 51–7).

Why do so many uncritically accept the importance of the local in Canadian politics? Peter Mair argues that the seemingly unquestioned support for the position amounts to an "ideology of local representation," one that results from the complacency of academics who have passively accepted its allegedly functional importance (one that they fail, however, to investigate) and from its vigorous defence by self-interested politicians (Mair 1992). Yet even the most cursory investigation of the evidence reveals that the local has proven unimportant to both Canadian politicians and voters. Politicians can hardly be credited with a serious interest in the local. For most of Canada's history, multi-member ridings were used for a number of provincial and federal elections, and they continue to be used for municipal contests in some locales. The move to single-member ridings was motivated by competitive political party pressures and key court rulings, not some desire to connect local voters to politics.

Nor has the alleged concern for local representation prevented politicians from constantly increasing the size of local ridings in nearly all provincial and federal jurisdictions. For instance, today's federal ridings contain, on average, five times as many people as they did in 1867 and twice as many as in 1953 (Pilon 2001). And these trends are similar for provincial jurisdictions as well (Pilon and Docherty 2006). Even the much-vaunted ombuds-role is hardly traditional; it wasn't until the 1970s that politicians gave themselves the resources to act as a kind of local representative by funding the opening of local constituency offices, allocating permanent offices in provincial and federal legislatures, and aiding travel costs so that members could regularly visit their local areas (Docherty 1997). The romantic notions of the local member collide with a history of decisions by politicians that make plain just how unimportant local representation has been to them in the grand scheme of Canadian politics.

[INSERT TABLE 8.1 HERE—Increases in size of ridings]

Assessing Canadian voters' views about local representation is a bit more complicated. Because of the "ideology of local representation," it is not surprising to hear voters claim that they think having a local member is good or that they would like their member to listen to local voters more (Anderson and Goodyear-Grant 2005). But if we are to understand to what degree voters make voting decisions on the basis of local representation, we must be more critical of these claims. There is a host of other evidence that challenges these survey results. For instance, countless academic studies have underlined that voters use party as the key factor in making their decision about which candidate to support. Some studies have supported this conclusion by demonstrating that there is little bonus for representatives who build up a local profile compared with those who do not; the overarching factor affecting their re-election will be the more general swing for or against their party (Crewe 1985). There is some debate in Canada about the magnitude of "personal voting," or the bonus that an individual MP can gain by his or her personal profile. However, the amount is small, and linked less to local factors than to cabinet position and national media attention (Irvine 1982; Docherty 1997, 2005).

Other studies have asked voters to rank the factors that influence their voting decision, and party comes out on top. One recent study did find that 40% of voters claimed that the individual candidate did factor into their voting decision. However, the much

more crucial finding was that only 4% of respondents were prepared to rank the individual candidate higher in their vote choice if it meant deviating from their preferred party choice. In other words, 96% of voters are making their choice primarily on the basis of party identification (Blais et al. 2003). As Marsh notes in the context of Irish voter surveys: "It seems likely that although many voters may vote a party ticket they will rationalise this to themselves in terms of candidate qualities" (Marsh 2007: 22). Another way we can assess the importance of local representation to voters is to get a sense of what people know about local members and gauge how many actually seek their help. In both cases, the figures are unimpressive. People can more readily identify parties and party leaders than regular politicians (with the exception of rural areas, where the name of a local politician is typically better known). And fewer than one in five survey respondents report contacting their local member (Gidengil et al. 2004; Norris 2004: 240–3).

Probably the most damning evidence against the "local representation" argument is simply that the voting results themselves demonstrate that people do not vote on the basis of locality. If the local *were* important, we might expect to see politicians elected on the basis of local identities rather than party identifications. On the other hand, if the policy differences between different parties were more important to voters, we might expect local votes to be divided among parties, and the winning local member to represent one of them. Of course, we know that the latter is the case in Canada at the provincial and federal level. In each locale, voters divide their support among the different parties—there is no homogenous local interest to be represented. The debate over local representation is important because those who make claims for it use it to defend our current plurality system or limit the range of options we may consider for reform. Now, if we are going to reform our voting system and some people like the idea of local representation, then such advocates should be free to make their case. But as with so many other aspects of the voting-system-reform debate, normative appeals should be brought into dialogue with the actual practice of Canadian politics. If trade-offs have to be made in the design of a new voting system, then they should be based more on those factors that are demonstrably important to Canadian voters—like party representation—and less on those for which the evidence is slight at best.

GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

The final key argument used to defend plurality is that the system assures that the government will remain accountable to voters because it allows them to "throw the rascals out." Basically, this argument holds that under plurality it is the voters who are ultimately in control of the formation of government and, by implication, the defeat of government. This is contrasted to the alleged experience of PR systems, where the voters elect parties but it is negotiations between the parties that decide who will form the government. Critics claim that this process can lead to situations where a significant group of former government supporters change their vote but the governing parties remain in place regardless by negotiating support from new coalition members. This

would be less likely in plurality precisely because of the system's tendency to exaggerate the impact of vote swings and overrepresent the most popular parties. For instance, if enough voters from Party A switched to Party B in a plurality election, then Party A would probably lose its inflated majority of seats while Party B would now enjoy an inflated majority. Because the shift in votes would lead to defeat for the government and the election of an alternative government, proponents argue that this means the voters are in control and that they are making government accountable to them.

The "government accountability" defence of plurality is the weakest of the four pillars. It rests largely on an idealized notion of party competition where two parties get alternating chances to offer the same things to voters. But this ignores both the fact that different parties do not tend to offer the same things to the public and the fact that the voters themselves are not united about what political results they want. Thus it is not clear how and to whom the mechanism is effecting accountability. For accountability to make sense in political terms, there has to be some relationship between what people want, what government does, and how people respond to government action or inaction, as the case may be.

But who is gaining the accountability when a government changes under plurality? Recall that most plurality governments are elected by a minority of voters. Logically, it makes no sense to argue that the change represents accountability for those who supported the government, as the new government probably owes its election to a different minority of voters. And the new government's minority of voters have not enjoyed any accountability from the change either—they did not support the previous government in first place. It is possible that there are some voters in the middle of the spectrum who switch back and forth between the major parties and that *they* could be said to enjoy the accountability of the change, though such voters would appear to have such broad political tastes that it becomes too difficult to judge what "accountability" amounts to in practical terms (if you are prepared to vote left *and* right, on what basis do you make distinctions about government performance?).

The fundamental problem with the "government accountability" defence is that it ignores politics. To argue that voters can gain accountability from government by replacing "party left" with "party right" is to ignore how real people in real political situations understand the notion of accountability. It is obviously ridiculous to argue that left-wing voters will be making "their" government accountable to them by replacing it with a right-wing alternative. Of course, leaving aside political divisions, the logic of the government accountability argument is simply not convincing. We are supposed to believe that accountability is satisfied under plurality because a small shift in votes can take a majority government away from a minority of voters and give it to a different minority of voters. In practice, even this distorted logic may not be what really happens, as governments can fall or rise based on changes in party competition rather than changes in support for the government.

OTHER DEFENCES OF PLURALITY

The four major arguments we've reviewed do not exhaust the possible defences of our current system. There are even weaker arguments offered to defend the continued use

of plurality in Canada. For instance, there are many essentially pragmatic arguments that suggest that the fact that Canada is a relatively successful country means that the "plurality system has served Canada well" and that, with such a track record of success, we shouldn't consider changing it (*Toronto Star* Editorial Board 2007). Setting aside the fact that such arguments could easily be used to justify authoritarian rule—and indeed *were* used to justify fascist governments in Italy, Spain, Portugal, and a host of authoritarian regimes in Latin America—the success of Canada is very much in the eye of the beholder. We are and have always been a politically divided country with strong disagreements about what success means, how to measure it, and how to spot it when it rides into town. The "success" argument is really a non-argument, as it avoids engaging the substantive issues raised by both proponents and critics of the status quo. It is designed to try to dismiss the discussion altogether.

Another weak argument claims that even if we allow that our current system is not ideal, we do not know what change might bring and as such we should do nothing. John Courtney argues that Canada has a host of problems that might be exacerbated by adopting PR. He claims that, as we don't know what might result from change, we should just stick with the status quo (Courtney 2004). The problem with the "we don't know about change" argument is that it ignores the fact that we don't know about non-change, either. In other words, it is possible that the results of our current system could change and lead to disastrous results in the future, because the future is unknowable with or without change. Of course, some might argue that our current system has already led to some pretty terrifying results—in particular, the overrepresentation of a number of regional interests that threaten the unity of the country.

The traditional defences of the plurality system in Canada—simplicity, majority government, local representation, and government accountability—prove to be less than compelling when some time is spent examining their assumptions and the evidence that might be brought to bear on the case. In each example, we have shown the claims to be variously one-sided (simplicity), undemocratic (majority government), unsustainable (local representation), or simply incoherent and illogical (government accountability).

PR's Alleged Weaknesses

Hardly a newspaper story is written that refers to PR in Canada that does not make reference to at least two of the four standard complaints offered by the critics of the system. Thus we tend to hear about Germany's "complex proportional voting scheme" or the chronic instability associated with PR in Italy or Israel. Or reporters will refer to the overweening power of the political parties in PR systems or the indecisiveness of the election results. Here, we will critically review the allegations that PR is too complex and opaque in its results, that it fosters instability and minority government, that it engenders party dynamics that are too stable and party dominant, and that it leads to a lack of accountability at both the local level and in terms of government formation.

COMPLEXITY

As with claims that plurality voting is simple, arguments suggesting that PR is complex are true in some ways but equally untrue in others. The point is that the complexity debate as regards PR is often one-sided. If we are referring to the process of balloting and vote counting, there is little doubt that PR systems are more complex than the simple methods of plurality. The complexity of the vote-marking procedures can range from something as simple as plurality—just marking an "X" next to a party name—to more involved markings requiring preferences to be made both among parties and among the candidates within or across parties. Vote counting under PR systems is undeniably complex, as it typically involves aggregating votes across a larger constituency than in plurality and then allocating representation on the basis of the achievement of quotas of the total votes rather than just a plurality of the votes.

But the complexity of a voting system must not be assessed simply on the basis of ballot marking and vote counting. The system's complexity must also be assessed on the basis of how clear the results of the election appear to be, given how people have voted in the election. And here, PR systems are much clearer in the results they produce than plurality voting systems. Whereas the relationship between votes and results under plurality is often distorted and the reasons for such distortions are opaque and hard to explain, the results in a PR election typically make intuitive sense to voters because the percentage of votes for each party tends to closely match the percentage of seats won by each party; that 20% of the votes will produce 20% of the seats in a PR system (give or take a few percent) is a much more clear and transparent result than 40% of the votes turning into 60% of the seats, as can occur under plurality.

In a sense, the simplicity argument offers a trade-off. People must decide what is more important—a simple way of adding up the votes but distorted and unclear election results, or a more complex way of adding up the votes that produces a fairly straightforward election result. In this, the choice should be clear: transparent election results should not be sacrificed to simple vote-counting methods just because the methods are simple. Of course, there is something disingenuous about the simplicity defences of plurality. There are many aspects of our electoral system that are complex and largely beyond the general working-knowledge of most voters, including how districts are allocated, how party funding is organized, and how voter registration is administered. But plurality's defenders do not insist that simplicity should rule in all these areas. Nor do they seem to have a problem with complexity in all other aspects of our modern society. The demand for "simplicity" in vote counting appears to be just special pleading, not a matter of principle or performance that might require us to sacrifice other important goals for our voting system. Thus it hardly amounts to a compelling reason to reject alternative voting systems with other attractive qualities.

INSTABILITY

If there is one criticism of PR that towers over all others—appearing in nearly all critical accounts of the system—it is that proportional voting systems lead to instability, either of the government or of politics more generally. Specifically, discussion on this

point has focused an inordinate amount of attention on the experiences of just two countries: Italy and Israel. PR as used in both is blamed for creating political instability, unresponsive legislatures, and overpowerful parties, particularly minor ones. We typically hear how Italy has suffered with "50 governments in 50 years" or that Israeli governments are held hostage to tiny extremist parties that exercise influence beyond their support in the community. The general impression is that little can be accomplished in such legislative settings, leading to public frustration with government. The "two I's" critique of PR remains a common reference in contemporary debates about voting-system reform in Canada and as such warrants a detailed examination. Here, we will critically assess the arguments about Italy and Israel's experiences with PR, focusing particular attention on the logic of the arguments and the methods of comparison before moving on to a more general discussion of PR and instability in other countries using the system.

❍ Just How Unstable Are Italy and Israel?

Our first line of inquiry in assessing PR use in Italy and Israel must be to establish the veracity of the claims that these countries have been unstable. There are a number of ways we can convert these broad claims into readily testable propositions. To assess their stability or instability, we can look at the length of term in office for a government, the frequency of elections, and changes in the structure of the party system. Let's take each in turn.

One standard test of stability/instability involves measuring the length of government, or how long a particular administration can stay in office. As noted earlier, the average length of government in a PR system is about 1.8 years, compared with 2.5 years for plurality (Woldendorp et al. 2000: 79). The gap between the two systems is less than a year—hardly a remarkable difference. But here, Italian experience appears to depart from other European PR-using countries. Scholars report that between 1948 and 1994 Italy had 48 different governments, with an average length of office of just ten months (Seton-Watson 1983; Furlong 1994). However, what is referred to as a "change of government" in the Italian setting is actually more akin to a cabinet shuffle here in Canada. If we examine how long key ministers held their positions without break, we get a better idea of the length of government. For instance, prime ministers in Italy in this period held office for an average of 27 months, or two-and-a-quarter years. Another key post, the minister of the interior, averaged 29 months without change. In fact, most ministers holding office between elections retained their positions through these successive "governments."

Another way to measure "instability" is by the frequency of elections. The more elections called (beyond a regular cycle of three or four years), suggests intractable political problems, perhaps just the instability that PR critics complain about. But between 1948 and 1994 Italy and Israel had only 12 and 13 elections respectively, or one about every four years. By contrast, Britain and Canada had 13 and 15 elections in the same period. At the electoral level, then, it appears the neither Italy nor Israel had call to go to the polls any more than Anglo-American democracies.

Instability can also be gauged by examining the structure of the party system over time. Dramatic changes in party strength may signal serious political instability. But curiously, both Italy and Israel have been marked by long periods where one party dominated the governing process, even though these ruling parties often lacked outright majorities. For instance, despite the fact that Italy saw more changes in government than Canada in the postwar period, it should be remembered that one party in Italy—the Christian Democrats (DC)—named all the prime ministers from 1944 to 1981 and remained the pivotal and largest party in both government and Parliament until 1992 (Furlong 1994). Israel has seen three different dominant coalitions in its history, with the first lasting from 1949 to 1977, the second from 1977 to 1984, and the last from 1984 to 1990. In all three periods, the prime minister and all senior ministers came from the largest parties; minor parties were able to exact little by way of concessions in terms of cabinet posts. Only in the 1990s has this changed somewhat with the rise of more orthodox religious parties (whereas before religious parties were less orthodox) and the decline of the Labour party (Diskin and Diskin 1995; Rahat and Hazan 2005: 338–40).

Most of the criticisms directed at PR involve claims about its influence on parties and party behaviour. PR is alleged to fuel the creation of many new parties, to lack incentives to make legislators respond to constituents, and to allow small parties to dominate the political arena. Unfortunately for the critics, the historical practice with PR in Italy and Israel does not support their claims. Both countries were divided politically at the time they chose PR, and subsequent elections merely reflected these divisions. However, over the postwar period the number of parties remained relatively constant in both countries. From 1950 to 1990 there was little change in either party system (Diskin and Diskin 1995; Furlong 1994).

The complaints about unresponsive MPs in PR systems may have some merit, but the question of whether MPs anywhere else are terribly responsive must be raised. In other words, it may not be PR that is to blame, but other factors that are common in non-PR systems as well—for instance, the increasing power of media or the reliance of political parties on corporate or public funding. Criticisms that focus on how PR creates MPs that are unaccountable to voters often romanticize how accountable MPs are under SMP rules. Additionally, in the Italian case, one factor that contributed to a weakened party discipline much more than the use of PR was the practice of secret balloting by MPs in the House, which effectively prevented party leaders from enforcing party discipline (Bull and Rhodes 1997).

Finally, the question of small-party influence—specifically, the idea that these parties exercise an unfair amount of influence—is also not supported by the historical record. Certainly, negotiations had to be conducted for major parties to get minor-party support, but there were always alternatives. When the Italian DC grew tired of the demands of the coalition partners to the right in the early 1960s, they struck a new deal with the socialist party to their left—an arrangement that held for over a decade (Furlong 1994). By the same token, when both of Israel's major parties felt that small-party demands were becoming too onerous in 1984, they formed a grand coalition between themselves and left the others out entirely (Diskin and Diskin 1995). Nor

were Italy and Israel unique in this regard; other PR-using countries, such as Germany and Austria, had similar experiences.

The "instability" arguments in the cases of Italy and Israel find little support when we examine factors such as the length of government rule, the number of elections, or the structure of the party system. Of course, all this isn't to say that there is nothing unique about Italy and Israel—clearly, there is. The point is rather to demonstrate that the condemnation of the voting system as the author of these countries' woes is poorly supported by evidence or effective arguments. Such an approach tends to suffer from overstatement, overgeneralization, and a lack of attention to the real political and historical contexts of the two locales. The critics seem to infer that if Italy and Israel had just adopted plurality instead of PR, they would not have struggled with the political issues that they have. But this ignores the historical contexts under which PR came into use in both countries. In Italy, the adoption of PR reflected the extreme polarization between the Catholic right and the communist left, with the former unprepared to sanction a plurality victory for their adversaries (Pilon 2005). In Israel, the adoption of PR was essential in forging national unity in a country whose existence was forcibly disputed both from within and without (Diskin and Diskin 1995; Rahat and Hazan 2005). As these conditions have largely remained in force ever since, one could argue that it is the long-term existence of essentially warlike conditions in and around the country that has had much greater influence on the hyper-inclusive approach to government than PR, as nearly all countries under threat of war tend to maximize internal unity through coalition or national-unity governments.

❍ Questions of Method

Beyond the empirical question of whether Italy and Israel are unstable as polities, there are larger methodological issues with using these examples to make the case against PR that must be addressed. The issues involve sample selection and the limits of comparison. For instance, even if there were some basis for the complaints levelled against the use of PR in Italy and Israel, that still wouldn't explain the frequency with which these two examples appear in anti-PR arguments. As nearly all European countries use some form of PR, it is not clear why only these two countries are regularly marshalled as evidence by the critics. What we have here is what political scientists would call a "sampling" problem, akin to someone trying to use the wrecking yard as the pool of cars to argue that cars in general don't work. Of course, the first thing any fair-minded person would say is that the cars in the wrecking yard do not reflect how cars generally work. If we want to draw conclusions about how cars work in general and we don't have the time or resources to test every single kind of car that exists in the world, then we have to put together a representative sample.

The same is true if we want to test propositions about the workings of different voting systems. Thus those that invoke only Italy and Israel to discredit PR are guilty of rigging their samples. Or, put another way, they are selectively choosing evidence to fit their conclusions. A representative sample on the question of PR and its effects would have to include more countries than just these two. Of course, as soon we do

that, it quickly becomes apparent that the anti-PR generalizations are even less persuasive. Ironically, unlike many of the claims made against PR, most of the generalizations about the effects of single-member-plurality systems—phony majorities, misrepresentation, regional balkanization—*do* hold up across different countries.

The other methodological problem noted above highlights the limits of the comparative approach: not everything can be compared unproblematically to everything else. For instance, when people raise the examples of Italy and Israel, the implication is usually that adoption of PR in Canada would produce similar political conditions. Aside from reiterating the point made above—that PR did not in fact create the "problems" it is typically accused of creating—we must also discredit this type of comparison. Canada is a very different place both socially and politically than Israel or Italy. A change of voting system is not going to introduce Israeli-style intractable religious and ethnic differences or automatically produce an Italian-style large communist party. And the point must be stressed that voting systems do not of themselves create social reality or, indeed, any specific political results. Instead, voting systems differ in the relative degree of openness they may or may not possess to political competition. If we *do* want to make comparisons, we need to establish ones with countries that are somewhat similar to Canada—or seriously limit what we can draw from the process of comparison altogether. In many ways, Germany would be much more comparable to Canada, with its federal system, its large Catholic minority, and its level of economic development; or New Zealand, with its legacy of British immigration and institutions, considerable Aboriginal population, and some degree of ethnic diversity. Tellingly, neither has been accused of Italy- or Israel-like problems.

❍ Broader Comparisons of PR and Stability

If we turn to a more representative sample of PR-using countries—specifically, those that would make for an effective comparison with Canadian circumstances, such as western-European countries—the accusations connecting PR with instability gain little support. PR governments tend to last nearly as long as plurality governments: 1.8 years on average for PR as compared with 2.5 years for plurality (Woldendorp et al. 2000: 79). PR-using countries have not had recourse to return to the polls with more frequency than plurality-using countries; between 1945 and 1998 PR countries averaged 16 elections, compared with an average of 16.7 elections for plurality countries (IDEA 2007). And western PR countries have not been unstable in terms of their economic development. In fact, in terms of economic growth and quality-of-life measures, western PR governments have reported consistently high performance ratings (Lijphart 1999a: 263–70, 1999b: 320–3).

The ritual invocation of Italy and Israel by those opposed to PR—and their claims that PR has contributed to political instability, unresponsive legislatures, and overpowerful parties—has little empirical backing. Upon examination, the arguments critical of the experience of PR in these countries are weak and lack a proper comparative context. In fact, the whole approach to singling out Italy and Israel while ignoring the experiences of other countries using PR casts doubt on the integrity of such research

projects, demonstrating at the very least a faulty and biased sampling procedure. From this false empirical base, the critics compound their error with problems of emphasis, tending toward overgeneralized and overstated comments about the specific political effects of voting systems. At the root of this work is often a rather simple notion that democratic institutions come into being by "choice," free from the influence of specific historical contexts and power struggles. Of course, when we turn to a truly representative sample of PR-using countries, the argument that "PR equals instability" appears even weaker. Instability, understood either in terms of government tenure or the larger party system, is not a problem for PR systems in western countries.

PARTY DOMINANCE

Another key criticism of PR actually inverts the "instability" thesis, claiming instead that the problem involves too much *stability*. In these complaints, PR creates sclerosis in the political system, leading to coalition governments or certain parties that cannot be effectively dislodged from government by elections, either because there are parties that are "un-coalitionable" (like the Communists in Italy) or because certain parties are centrally located in the political spectrum and thus end up as everyone's preferred junior partner (like the FDP in Germany). A related point argues that parties in PR systems are generally too strong and centralized. Concretely, these criticisms have emerged within the countries using PR, with debate in the Netherlands about the tendency toward stasis in the political system emerging from the 1960s on, and concerns in Germany about the overweening power and influence of the major state parties on the right and left. By inference, the critics suggest that plurality is less likely to become blocked and that parties under plurality are less dominant.

There is certainly evidence of long periods of government stability in a number of PR systems. In Sweden, the Social Democrats have dominated government since the 1930s. The CDU has been the dominant party in Germany for most of the postwar period. The DC was a part of every Italian government from 1946 to 1994—and many other examples could be found. But then, one can find long periods of government stability in plurality systems as well. The Conservatives have dominated postwar Britain. The Liberals have ruled for most of the 20th century in Canada. And so on. If we shift our attention to the subnational arena in Canada, we can find even more examples of stability under plurality—particularly in Alberta, BC, and Ontario. Then again, we can also find party and coalition alternation in PR systems. So the argument seems weak when we subject it to a comparative analysis Both across plurality and PR systems and among those countries using PR, stability and change can be found all over.

A more serious problem with the "stability" argument is that it underestimates the more subtle kind of influence voters can have under PR beyond defeating a government or driving a party out of office. Because PR systems tend to produce coalition or minority government, governments tend to be more responsive to shifts in voter support. If a centre-left or centre-right coalition government witnesses a shift in voting support among their coalition members, such a shift tends to signal in which direction policy should move. Thus voters may not need to defeat the government or remove a

party from office to affect a government's actions. Of course, strategically placed parties may find themselves the subject of much attention, but they too can find themselves on the outside of a coalition if their partners think things have become too "stable." In fact, this has occurred on a number of occasions in Germany, where a grand coalition of left and right has eliminated the need to work with the centrist FDP. Meanwhile, the concerns raised in the Netherlands about government stasis led to considerable debate and some reform initiatives, but in the end those making the case in the 1960s and 1970s did not convince enough people that their concerns warranted changing the system in a substantial way. The issue has re-emerged recently, though discussions are focused on a shift to a different form of PR rather than a move away from PR (Andeweg 2006; Dutch Civic Forum 2006).

The idea that parties are more dominating in PR systems is also poorly articulated. Parties are dominant in *all* systems, as they are a fact of political life. The only difference is that plurality systems have a strong romantic characterization of local accountability that tends to distort how powerful parties actually are in all aspects of plurality voting. Yet few analysts would doubt the power of parties in plurality systems like the US or Canada. In the German case, the concerns about party power were also rooted in issues not directly connected with the voting system. German parties utilized state-sanctioned foundations to fund their efforts, and these foundations received a considerable amount of their money directly from the state. Concerns were raised that this relationship might lead to an unbalanced situation between voters and parties, with the latter able to maintain themselves despite declining support from voters (Scarrow 2004, 2006). What is interesting is that this sort of trend has only extended beyond Germany in recent years. In fact, in Canada, new state financing laws have increased the amount of state support for political parties and raised many of the same concerns articulated in the German case. Thus party dominance is not solely the product of the voting system or an issue that should be linked only to PR systems.

LOCAL ACCOUNTABILITY/GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

The questions of party dominance and stability re-emerge in a slightly different way when critics of PR turn to the question of accountability, specifically in terms of local representation and government formation. On the one hand, critics argue that PR systems lack effective local representation, thus leading to a political system where voters cannot control which politicians are elected. Either the version of PR lacks a local representative altogether, as in the party-list form, or it offers at best a diluted degree of locality in either the multi-member STV form or the necessarily enlarged single-member-riding version of MMP. On the other hand, they argue that PR lacks accountability as concerns government formation because it is the parties—not the voters—who will decide how the government is formed. This will occur because, as no party will typically secure a majority of the votes, the voting process will not decisively determine the outcome of the election, unlike in the typical case under plurality.

The "accountability" arguments as applied to PR suffer from the same incoherence and inconsistency as those offered for plurality. As local accountability is largely

a myth in plurality systems, it seems unreasonable to expect a higher standard from PR systems. In fact, some PR systems are refreshingly frank about how unimportant this factor is. In Sweden, voters do not expect national legislators to be bargain-style ombuds-people; they have an effective ombuds-service for that or they have decentralized decision making to the local level of government, where appropriate. It would appear that a lot of the academic discussion that criticizes PR systems on this question is still in the grip of a sort of ideological commitment to local representation, despite the considerable evidence to suggest that local representation doesn't really matter. The commitment has led many reform-oriented academics to applaud the MMP form of PR as the "best of both worlds" because it retains single-member ridings (Shugart and Wattenberg 2001). Though here it is telling that, when we turn to the concrete aspects of the analysis, the "local" may not be very local at all. For instance, American ridings are anything but local. The average size of a US congressional house district is 500,000 people—five times the average size of a Canadian federal riding (Kromkowski and Kromkowski 1991). This makes a mockery of "local" representation. Meanwhile, the multi-member ridings that are seen as less than ideal in Europe often have fewer people in them than one single-member riding in the US. The "local accountability" issue is often raised, but seldom demonstrated to be an effective or important part of any western political system.

Criticisms of the accountability of government under PR are even less compelling than the criticisms of local accountability. In this case, critics claim that because the question of government formation is seldom clear from the voting results, the decision about forming the government is decided by the parties rather than the voters. This is contrasted with experience under plurality, where the voters are alleged to have been in control of the decision precisely because the voting results usually *do* present an unambiguous result about who should get to form the government. The key problem with this argument is that the logic is faulty. The voters do not "choose" the government under plurality—they are only given an opportunity to mark their ballot for a local candidate of a particular party. If their local candidate's party ends up with a majority of seats, then that party gets to be the government. Thus there is a step in between the voter's choice and government formation, just as there is in PR. The fact that plurality will typically award a minority of voters with a majority government is the result of its systemic features, not of the voters' "choices."

On the other hand, if plurality really is being credited with giving voters control, then it must be recognized that it is an arbitrary and capricious form of control; the kind where 40% may give some voters the ability to form the government—or not. In 1930, 45% was not enough to give Liberal voters "control" of the federal government, though five years later it suddenly was. In 1972, 38.5% only gave the Liberals a minority government, though in 1997 the same amount was good enough for a majority government. And many more examples could be cited. To speak about "control" or "choosing" implies a degree of consistency in actions and reactions that plurality results fail to provide. Nor is it really compelling to talk about "voters" (i.e., as a whole) choosing governments under plurality when the results typically show that only a minority could be credited with the successful choice. Surely, to speak of the "voters"

collectively choosing would at least imply a majority getting to choose? Thus for a host of reasons, the "plurality government formation" arguments are largely incoherent and illogical.

By contrast, a case can be made that, in practice, the majority of the public *can* be said to "choose" who forms the government in a host of PR countries because potential coalition arrangements are often signalled during the election itself (Powell 2000). Thus when they cast their votes, voters already know who their parties are likely to ally with to form a majority government. In these cases, PR actually performs better on accountability in terms of government formation. Some argue that, despite these agreements, there are many cases in PR countries where a party gains support but is turfed from government or, conversely, loses support but remains in government. One study suggested that this occurred in 25% percent of the cases, compared to just 5% of the cases in plurality systems (Katz 1997: 166–9). The problem with such studies is that they do not track the long-term responses of voters to what appear on the surface to be counter-intuitive coalition-making results. In New Zealand, voters responded to a counter-intuitive coalition deal made in the 1996 election by severely punishing the responsible party in the subsequent election (Nagel 2004: 130). Or it may be that the coalition deals worked out in PR systems after elections did ultimately meet with the approval of a majority of voters in those countries. There is also evidence that plurality systems can deliver counter-intuitive results; indeed, in one study of western countries it was discovered that the systems let the "loser win" nearly 20% of the time (Powell 2000: 130).

PR has been accused of complexity, instability, too much stability and party dominance, and a lack of accountability in terms of local representation and government formation. But a critical scrutiny of the arguments and the facts used to support such accusations has found them wanting. PR systems create more transparent results; provide stable government and party competition; allow for nuanced shifts in government on policy and composition; and perform no worse than plurality on local representation, and arguably much better on accountability in terms of government formation.

New Issues: Separating Defensible from Indefensible Claims

Over the past two decades, a number of new issues have entered into the debate over voting systems—in particular, concerns over declining voter turnout in elections and what is felt to be the increasingly ugly tone of political campaigns. Some reformers have highlighted how a shift to proportional voting might affect both of these concerns, perhaps increasing voter turnout and fostering a more consensual, less confrontational approach to politics. These two themes alone have generated considerable excitement among reformers and more detached academics. But the claims may exceed what can be demonstrated with the available evidence about the potential impact of a change of voting system. It may be that such forecasts are too optimistic, which could condition people to expect too much from reform and be disappointed with results that fall

short. In the campaign for voting-system reform, advocates need to distinguish between defensible and indefensible claims. Here, we'll explore the claims made about voter turnout and political culture under PR, as well as more general claims about the potential impact of PR on the political system.

Voter Turnout

It is hardly surprising that voter turnout has become linked with voting-system reform in many people's minds. Simply put, PR countries would appear to enjoy higher turnout in their elections than countries using plurality voting. Studies differ in their assessments of the magnitude of the effect: some find a modest 3 to 5% difference between PR and plurality countries while others claim up to 11% more turnout in PR systems on average. The typical bonus awarded to PR systems over plurality tends to run to about 7 to 8% (Blais and Aarts 2006). For many, then, it stands to reason that a shift to PR voting should lead to an increase in voter turnout in Canada (CRIC 2001). But such a conclusion does not necessarily follow from the facts. New Zealand recently changed its voting system from plurality to a form of PR but witnessed voter turnout levels fall slightly rather than improve. And PR countries too have witnessed a steady decline in voter turnout over the past three decades, despite maintaining consistently higher levels than plurality countries. The factors affecting voter turnout are much broader than just the voting system, including the organization of the party system, changing patterns of voter mobilization, and the shift to a largely media-centric form of campaigning as the chief means of conveying political messages to voters (Gray and Caul 2000; Geys 2006).

What all this means is that the impact of the voting system on levels of voter turnout is actually hard to isolate. It may be that the effect of a shift to PR in Canada would increase voter turnout, but it is also possible that such an effect could be masked by other factors driving voter turnout even lower. This appears to have been the case recently in New Zealand, where PR did rally new voters and previously less-motivated voters but could not completely counteract a long-term trend of declining turnout informed by changes in how parties mobilized or did not mobilize voters (Vowles 2002). The decline in personal contact between parties and voters has been highlighted as a key factor influencing the less-motivated members of the public in particular to vote (Gerber and Green 2000; Franklin 2004). It stands to reason that increased openings in the political system might encourage those who are presently discouraged or marginalized to participate, and there is some evidence to support this both in the Canadian context and abroad (Pammett and Leduc 2003; Galatas 2004; Geys 2006). But on the other hand, there is evidence that some voters sit out where elections do not appear to be decisive or the choices are too varied (Brockington 2004).

Of course, we might decide that it is better to trade participation by "horse race" voters for that of more policy-oriented voters—but we should understand that we might not end up ahead in terms of total numbers in the end. For all these reasons, those keen on voting-system reform must be cautious about promises of increased voter turnout resulting from a shift to PR. The evidence to support such conclusions is mixed at best.

Political Culture

Another popular refrain among reformers is that the move to PR will contribute to a shift in the tenor of politics itself. In some versions of this pitch, advocates utilize insights from the academic Arend Lijphart, who argues that PR systems are characterized by an inclusive and consensual approach to politics (Lijphart 1977, 1999a). In others, proponents work out their own version of the consensus position, arguing that PR forces parties to find points of agreement ultimately because they will have to work together in a coalition. The "coalition effect" will also be thought to lessen the viciousness of the parties' attacks on one another precisely because they may have to work together at some point (Milner 1999). Scholars typically qualify such statements with admonitions that conflicts and disputes will still arise under PR, but some of the more excitable activists on the question tend to cast the "PR equals consensus" line a bit literally. While there is something to what these positions set out, proponents can too easily paint a portrait of consensual politics where conflict, partisan loyalty, and strong opinion all but disappear. Such a portrait does not match the political practice where proportional voting is used. Instead, political partisanship and divisions remain at the forefront of political discourse. In fact, some of the divisions—particularly on either side of the left or right division—may be sharpened. It is important to underline that the change to politics that PR can accomplish is not a populist denial of politics or a cultural shift in the way politicians interact so much as an alteration of the incentives for parties to work together. PR creates a situation where a grandstanding kind of opposition will get little in the way of results. It also creates incentives for coalition building, though such efforts do not suppress politics as much as create a space to negotiate differences into an acceptable compromise.

The problem with the "end of conflict" position of some reform advocates is that it can raise public expectations to an unreasonable level, and those disappointed expectations can fuel a backlash not just against politicians but against the new system itself. This is what nearly occurred in New Zealand when reformers oversold the "end of politics" argument to frustrated voters in the run-up to the voting-system change. However, when the new voting system produced a diverse Parliament that proceeded to grandstand over the formation of the first government and then over subsequent policy decisions, many voters felt cheated and called for repeal. Over the longer term, however, as politicians came to realize that the old tricks would not necessarily work in the new system, voters came to appreciate what their new voting system could offer and set aside their unrealistic expectations (Karp 2002). But to avoid such a crisis, reformers should be careful in making promises about how PR will alter political cultures. Canada is a politically divided society and PR won't make the differences within it go away. The point of PR is precisely to better respect those differences, not cover them up, and offer a better way to represent and broker among them.

Defensible Claims

If better voter turnout and a consensual culture of politics are not readily defensible positions in making the case for PR, there are some concrete claims that one can make

that *can* be defended, particularly as concerns the accuracy of election results, an increased level of competition among parties, and a qualitative change in the strategic pressures facing voters in making their voting choice. First, as set out in Chapter 4, PR will lead to more accurate results for voters in terms of their political party choices, providing the new system is fully proportional. Second, there is no denying that a move to PR will increase the competitiveness of the party system, both by better representing existing parties where they are weak (thus giving them an incentive to expand their support) and by lowering the barriers to new competitors (thus forcing existing parties to be more accountable or risk losing support to others). Finally, it can also be defended that a shift to PR will alter the strategic dimension of political competition from the voters' point of view by reducing negative strategic-voting pressures (voting for the "best of the worst") and increasing their positive strategic-voting power (choosing among parties to further their policy goals). The latter will occur because under PR voters will probably have a range of parties to support rather than the more narrow "party left and party right" opportunity provided by plurality.

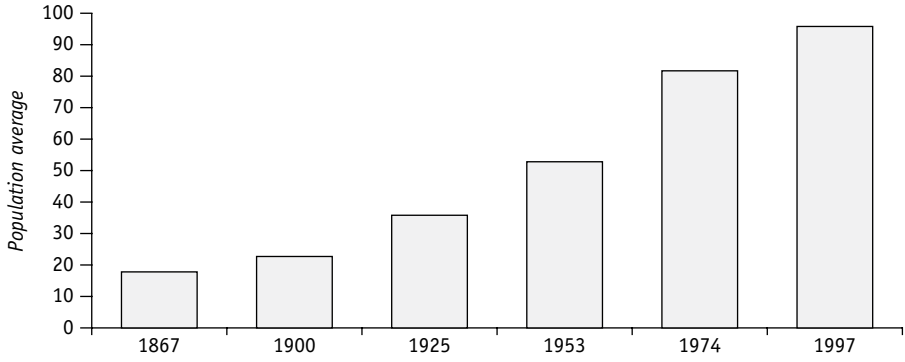
PR advocates must be careful in the claims they make about the possible outcomes of voting-system reform. Claims that PR will increase voter turnout or replace conflict-oriented party competition with a new "politics of consensus" are not well supported by strong evidence. It is possible—and arguments sound compelling—that PR could be expected to increase Canadian voter turnout, but the comparative evidence does not necessarily "prove" that this will be the case. In fact, some important counter-evidence can be marshalled. On the other hand, claims that focus on the more competitive results of elections held under PR *can* be firmly grounded in evidence and thus constitute strong and defensible claims, particularly those that focus on improved accuracy in election results, increased levels of party competition, and an altered environment of strategic voting.

Conclusion

A good deal of what passes for debate over voting systems is speculation, misinformation, overstatement, and outright assertion. When we turn to the facts, the story of the performance of these different voting systems turns out to be very different. In the Canadian context, the debate over voting systems has included a debate about values and a debate over comparative voting-system performance. The "values" debate is more recent and largely driven by well-meaning but ultimately misguided practitioners of civic engagement-style encounters between experts and the public in various contexts—typically, settings where a new voting system is being considered. But a values approach is misleading and poorly suited to examining voting-system reform. It encourages an uncritical view about the origins of electoral institutions and the reasons why such arrangements have been kept in place (thus limiting our understanding of just how difficult change will be), and it limits a critical enquiry into all aspects of the voting system by turning key components—for instance, local representation—into values.

The more far-reaching debate over voting systems in Canada has concerned questions of voting-system performance. Here, we encounter many long-standing but poorly substantiated claims about the workings of our plurality system and those of PR in other countries. These include old chestnuts like the typical casting of the stability and alleged accountability of plurality against the instability and lack of accountability associated with PR. Such generalizations, however, do not withstand serious scrutiny. But there are also new debates concerning the potential effects of voting systems, specifically their potential impact on voter turnout and political culture. While there is some encouraging evidence to support such views, there is also counter-evidence that suggests that such claims may be overstated. In the end, what is not debated is that plurality is simple to count and tends to produce majority governments, while PR more accurately represents voters and allows for more political competition. The real debate should be about what such results mean for a democratic society.

FIGURE 8.1 INCREASES IN AVERAGE CANADIAN FEDERAL RIDING SIZES, 1867-1997



Source: Compiled from Elections Canada historical data.

11
Party Politics and Voting Systems in Canada

DENNIS PILON

THE VOTING SYSTEM COMPRISES A SET OF rules that determine how votes cast in an election will be converted into representation in a legislative body. The choice of voting system determines how voters will mark their ballot, how the ballots will be counted, and the method of determining winners. There are different kinds of voting systems in use around the world and even within present-day Canada. Though every Canadian voter has used a voting system, few are aware of the implications and repercussions of using any particular one. Indeed, for most Canadians it is like an invisible institution. Members of the public focus on how to mark their ballot, but the larger voting system within which such a vote is cast goes largely unnoticed. By contrast, politicians and political parties pay close attention to voting systems. They have been, and remain, the key players in their maintenance or reform.

This chapter will underscore the politics fuelling the origin, maintenance, and efforts to reform Canada's voting systems at all three levels of government. As will be made clear, interests of party have been paramount in such decisions, though not simply as a matter of electoral self-interest. Instead, the character of a given party system and the nature of the challenges it has faced have proven crucial in affecting decisions about institutional rules. Thus we must approach the question historically to assess the reasons why Canada's voting systems have been much contested but only rarely altered.

The argument will advance on three fronts. First, this chapter will set out what a voting system is and some of the key ideas about how they function. In addition, it will summarize the many different kinds of voting systems that have been used in Canada and are presently in use. Second, the chapter will explore the debate over where electoral institutions come from and why they are maintained or reformed. Finally, it will divide Canadian experience with voting system reform into three broad periods to highlight the factors contributing to the rise in reform interest as well as its ultimate success or failure.

Voting Systems and the Debate over Their Effects

Every voting system comprises three distinctive components: a districting rule, ballot design, and a voting formula (Rae 1971). The *districting rule* determines

how many representatives will be elected from any given circumscribed geographic area, typically a distinction between a single- or multimember district. *Ballot design* refers to how voters mark their ballot, either through a nominal "X" or check mark, or via some ordinal preference method (e.g., 1, 2, 3). Finally, the *voting formula* refers to the rule applied to the raw votes setting out what level of support is required to secure representation. In some cases, a winner need only get more votes than any other candidate (a *plurality*); in others, a winner might need to gain a majority of votes cast to be declared elected; while in still others multiple winners might need only gain a certain proportion of the total votes to get a seat.

These three component elements can be combined in several ways to create different voting systems. For instance, the plurality formula can be combined with either single- or multimember districts. The first combination produces the voting system we typically use for provincial or federal elections in Canada, single-member plurality (SMP), while the second combination, multimember plurality, or "at large," is used for most municipal elections in British Columbia and a few other locales across Canada. Or we can see how the same ordinal ballot structure (where voters number their preferences) can be combined with different voting formulas and districting methods. For instance, Australia uses a preference ballot structure in two different ways. In the lower house, it is combined with single-member districts and a majority voting formula in a voting system called the *alternative vote* (AV). Meanwhile, in the upper house the preference ballot is combined with multimember districts and a proportional voting formula to create a voting system referred to as the single transferable vote (STV).

Voting systems can be defined and compared in several ways. For example, some scholars distinguish different voting systems in terms of their component parts (e.g., pure or mixed systems) or their impact on government formation (e.g., majoritarian or non-majoritarian) (Massicotte and Blais 1999; Norris 2004). But the academic approach that best aligns with how actual political actors have understood them organizes voting systems in terms of the kinds of results they produce (Law Commission of Canada 2004; Pilon 2007). Despite containing myriad unique elements, every voting system in use around the world can be fit within a fourfold typology of plurality, majority, proportional, and semi-proportional voting systems (see Table 11.1).

Why different countries developed or adopted different voting systems has been the subject of debate. Some have argued that voting systems were influenced by social cleavage structures (Lipset and Rokkan 1967) or political culture (Rokkan 1970) or the size of the party system (Lijphart 1999). Others have underlined the role of political parties in establishing rules that would benefit themselves electorally (Colomer 2005). But until recently

Table 11.1 Voting System Families

Voting System Family	Voting System Variants	Voting System Use by Country
Plurality	Single-member plurality	Canada, United States, United Kingdom
	Multimember plurality	Canada, United States (some local elections)
Majority	Double ballot	France
	Alternative vote	Australia
Proportional	Party list	Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Belgium, Netherlands, Italy
	Single transferable vote	Ireland, Malta, Australia (Senate)
	Mixed-member proportional	Germany, New Zealand
Semi-proportional	Limited vote	United States (some local elections)
	Cumulative vote	United States (some school board elections)
	Single nontransferable vote	Japan (1947–93)
	Parallel	Japan, Italy (1994–2004)

most work simply assumed—rather than explored—where voting rules came from, typically implying that any given voting system must have been sanctioned or approved by the public somehow, particularly when it has been in use for a long time (Katz 1997). Some commentators dispute that voting systems are really that important or influential in terms of affecting election results (Courtney 1999). Yet considerable debate arises whenever reforming a voting system is raised publicly.

All the debate over voting systems is really a debate about voting system effects. For most of the twentieth century, the discussion was rather unbalanced in North American political science. The region's own preferred voting system, SMP, was typically viewed as superior and promoted for providing local representation, a stable two-party system, majority government, a regular alternation in power between the different parties, and an efficient means of legislating policy (Lijphart 1977; Rustow 1950). The main alternative, various forms of proportional representation (PR), was characterized as fuelling political instability, party fragmentation, and legislative gridlock, largely on the basis of the experience in Weimar Germany, Israel, and postwar Italy (Hermans [1941] 1972; Wiseman 1997). More recent empirical research on the workings of these different voting systems across a wide range of countries in Western Europe and the Anglo-American countries has exposed most of these claims as myths. For instance, many of the countries using SMP have

multiparty rather than two-party systems, while most countries using PR in Western Europe in the postwar period have been neither unstable nor unable to pass legislation (Lijphart 1994, 1999; Mair 1991; Norris 2004; Woldendorp, Keman, and Budge 2000).

To the extent that particular voting systems can be said to have specific effects, the claims must be narrowed or specified contextually. For instance, the French political scientist Maurice Duverger argued that voting systems have both mechanical and psychological effects. Mechanical effects are those that are directly observable, like the way that an SMP system will tend to overreward regionally concentrated voters and fail to represent popular opinions that are spread too thinly across the polity. By contrast, psychological effects are harder to quantify but nonetheless real, as when voters decide to vote strategically for a less favoured choice for fear that their top preference may not be competitive in their geographic area (Duverger [1954] 1963). Another approach examines the results produced by particular voting systems in different locales over long periods, precisely to weigh the impact of the voting system against other important variables at work in any particular context. For instance, comparing the Western European and Anglo-American experience in the postwar period, one could say that SMP systems have tended to have smaller party systems, produce more single-party majority governments, and create significant barriers to the competitive entry of new parties, while PR systems have tended to have larger party systems, produce more coalition governments, and place fewer barriers to the entry of new parties (Blais 1991; Powell 2000). These "effects" are really broad tendencies, affected by the ebb and flow of political competition. As Peter Mair (1992, 85) once noted, voting systems "provide, at best, 'facilitating conditions,' the impact of which will also be mediated by a variety of other institutional cultural factors."

Over its history, Canada has experimented with a range of voting systems, sometimes briefly but in some cases for extended periods (Pilon 2006; see Table 11.2). Still, plurality voting systems, particularly the single-member variety, have remained the country's longest and most widely used voting methods. Federally, SMP has dominated, with some minor use of dual-member ridings from 1867 to 1966. Provincially, it was common to see SMP used in rural areas with multimember plurality used for urban seats well into the twentieth century. In the early to mid-part of the twentieth century, several provinces experimented with semi-proportional and proportional voting systems for urban centres, the latter usually in combination with majority voting used for rural areas. One province briefly introduced majority voting for both rural and urban areas in the early 1950s. Canadian municipalities have used both single-member ("wards") and multimember ("at large") plurality, with a few adopting proportional voting for varying periods.

Table 11.2 Nonplurality Voting Systems Used in Canada

Province	System	Adoption	Repeal	Application
Ontario	Limited vote	1885	1893	Toronto
Manitoba	Single transferable vote	1920	1955	Urban
	Alternative vote	1924	1955	Rural
Alberta	Single transferable vote	1924	1956	Urban
	Alternative vote	1924	1956	Rural
British Columbia	Alternative vote	1951	1953	All ridings

Municipality	System	Adoption	Repeal
Calgary	Single transferable vote	1916	1961
	Alternative vote	1961	1973
Lethbridge	Single transferable vote	1928	1929
Edmonton	Single transferable vote	1922	1928
Vancouver	Single transferable vote	1920	1923
Victoria	Single transferable vote	1920	1921
South Vancouver	Single transferable vote	1918	1928
West Vancouver	Single transferable vote	1917	1930
Nelson	Single transferable vote	1917	1919
Port Coquitlam	Single transferable vote	1917	1921
Mission City	Single transferable vote	1917	1921
New Westminster	Single transferable vote	1917	1919
Regina	Single transferable vote	1920	1926
Moose Jaw	Single transferable vote	1920	1925
Saskatoon	Single transferable vote	1920	1926
North Battlefield	Single transferable vote	1920	1924
Winnipeg	Single transferable vote	1920	1971
Transcona	Single transferable vote	c. 1941–44	1971
St. James	Single transferable vote	1922	1971
St. Vital	Single transferable vote	c. 1931–34	1971

Where "Democratic" Institutions Come From

The voting system is just one part of a larger set of rules—the electoral system—that shape the practice of elections. Scholars have explored the origins and reform of issues like voter registration (Smith and Courtney 1991), redistricting (Courtney 2001), and campaign finance in Canada (Paltiel 1966),

but less attention has been given to the extension of the franchise, the voting system, and the achievement of even the minimum conditions of democracy. Queries about the origins of Canadian institutions are often directed to the preamble of the 1867 British North America Act, which states that Canada will have "a Constitution similar in Principle to that of the United Kingdom" (Leone 2006–07) or assumed to have simply arisen in response to what the public wants or has wanted. More recently, commentators have relied on political culture to explain Canadian use of different institutions, for instance, arguing that the failure of voting system reform efforts in Prince Edward Island, Ontario, and British Columbia reflect the public's attachment to a local member.

The problem with such views is that there is scant evidence to support them. Until the recent referenda on voting systems in several Canadian provinces, there had been almost no public input into the shape of the country's electoral institutions. Norman Ward (1950, vii–viii) noted more than a half century ago that the rules governing our elections have been the stuff of political battle, defined primarily by party self-interest. Even when reforms appeared to be animated by lofty goals—for example, with the creation of a national franchise and chief electoral officer in 1920, or the introduction of federal electoral boundary commissions in the 1960s—such endeavours were often "politics masquerading as principles," as Ward put it. And, as we shall see in the case of voting system reform, where politicians feared unpalatable political outcomes they often showed no hesitation in reforming long-standing institutional arrangements.

Canadian electoral institutions are fundamentally political compromises, representing the interests—and fears—of those designing them. In the Canadian context, many took shape amid a broader struggle for a minimally democratic state and then later alongside or in response to demands for a more substantive democratic process (McKay 2000). Comparative work on democratization has underscored that political struggle, as opposed to political culture or some kind of functional necessity, has defined institutional developments across Western countries as concerns the extension of franchise (Przeworski 2008, 2009), the parliamentarization of the executive (von Beyme 2000), and the end of corruption in electoral administration (O'Leary 1962; Ziblatt 2009). Indeed, several recent comparative volumes highlight how political struggle was responsible for most Western voting systems as well (Ahmed 2013; Pilon 2013). But Canadian electoral studies have largely eschewed both this approach and any study of some of these key breakthroughs in the democratization process (e.g., the nineteenth-century extension of the franchise, the adoption of the secret ballot, or the various struggles over voting systems). To understand where Canadian "democratic" institutions (like the voting system) come from, whom they serve, and what might animate their reform, we have to go back and look.

Canada's Three Eras of Voting System Reform

From 1867 to 1914, Canada's electoral system was a political battleground. All manner of electoral law was subject to often self-interested "reform," including balloting, districting, voter registration, and the franchise. Only the voting system remained untouched and largely unremarked upon. Plurality voting had been chosen for national and provincial elections in Canada without controversy, its adoption in 1867 often credited to British influence. But the imperial connection was, at best, indirect. More concretely influential were the decades of electoral experience in the pre-Confederation colonies themselves (Kerr 1970).

Internationally, voting system reform emerged as a reform issue in the mid- to late nineteenth century, often in culturally divided European countries (e.g., Switzerland) or to address coalition-making problems in Anglo-American party systems. But it made little headway. In all cases the political systems were either controlled by a small traditional or business elite or a tight two-party system. Those with the power to reform were uninterested in opening up the political system to the greater electoral competition (for more detail on these events, see Chapter 3 in Pilon 2013).

In Canada, a functioning two-party system emerged shortly after Confederation and remained in place, largely unchallenged, until the pressures of war forced a realignment of federal parties in 1917. The only successful voting system reform in this period was the adoption of semi-proportional limited voting in Ontario for provincial elections from the multimember riding of Toronto. Under this system, voters would be restricted to casting two votes in a multimember riding electing three representatives—the restriction would allow minority candidates a chance to be elected. Inspired by party self-interest (the ruling Liberals wanted a share of the urban representation that was dominated by the Conservatives), the experiment lasted for three elections, only to be repealed by the government when it appeared that the system might allow a labour rather than a Liberal candidate to win a seat (Pilon 2006). Federally and provincially, the dominance of two-party systems across the country during this period effectively sidelined any critical appraisal of the voting system.

The Reform Era, 1914 to 1956

The period from 1914 to 1956 witnessed the breakdown of Canada's traditional two-party system amid repeated challenges from new political forces

perceived as threatening to the status quo. It was also the single most dynamic period of voting system reform in the country's history. New voting systems were adopted in more than two dozen municipalities across the country and given serious consideration in many more. Three provinces adopted new voting systems, and federal discussion of the issue emerged repeatedly in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. Though the traditional plurality system would reassert itself in most locales by the late 1950s, the scope of the reform adoptions and the longevity of their use in a few cases refutes the oft-stated view that voting system reform has had little impact in Canada (this section draws from Phillips 1976 and Pilon 2006).

World War I would prove to be the catalyst for reform of all kinds, with progressives finding a home in both traditional and new political forces (Laycock 1990), but the conditions facilitating change had its roots in the previous decade. Prior to the war, progressives had gained a foothold in several provincial Liberal parties, securing promises to introduce a variety of institutional reforms, including proportional voting systems. Upon gaining office, they did pass permissive legislation allowing municipalities to adopt PR, either by vote of council or referenda. But few locales took up the option. Even where reformers were successful, their gains were often short-lived and quickly repealed.

The real impetus for reform was the general state of social upheaval following the end of the war and the challenges to the conventional party system that were then successfully mounted. Here the defining moment was the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919. The end of the war had led to considerable political uncertainty. Would the wartime coalition government hold together, signalling a reconfigured national party system, or would the old two-party system be revived? And how might farmers, organized labour, and returning soldiers influence the resulting policy mix? The Winnipeg General Strike proved the litmus test for the way the political wind was blowing, demonstrating a fairly high level of public support for the strikers and their demands for good jobs, housing, and social services.

In the aftermath of the revolts of 1919, conventional political operatives began scrambling for responses. This only intensified when labour candidates won all available seats on the Winnipeg city council later that fall, and a farmer/labour coalition captured power in Ontario. Now voting system reform emerged as a popular reform, with newspaper editors and political elites keen to make room for the "reasonable labour man." A wave of conversions at the municipal and provincial level followed. Manitoba's progressive Liberal administration, which had done little on voting system reform in its previous five years in office, now rushed through reforms for municipal and provincial voting to forestall what they feared was a coming labour

sweep (Lightbody 1978a, 317–19). Alberta's farmers came to power in 1921 and introduced proportional voting for urban centres and the majoritarian alternative vote for rural areas, which conveniently had the effect of bolstering their support in rural areas while dividing their opponents in the cities. Manitoba would later introduce majority voting in rural areas as well.

By 1921, with the federal Liberal coalition in tatters, its former farmer and labour allies established in their own parties, there was a general consensus among the political competitors (except the Conservatives) that proportional voting would be a good thing. In many ways, political conditions in Canada did not appear terribly different than those in Western Europe, where a left–right polarization was squeezing centre parties and aiding the adoption of PR systems. But the character of the emerging Canadian party system would prove distinctive. Though the 1921 federal election produced a Parliament where a majority of members belonged to parties ostensibly committed to PR, the opportunity was quickly squandered. Labour and socialist politics did not make enough of a breakthrough in 1921 to appear threatening, while the more successful farmers were too tentative to seize the opportunity afforded by a Parliament where no party had a majority of seats. Mackenzie King's Liberals skilfully managed the challenges of minority government, avoiding any concession on voting system reform. The one vote held on the issue to mount a trial of PR in several large cities failed to pass in 1923. Where a fear of left electoral power remained, as in Calgary and Winnipeg, PR also remained in place. Where it faded, so too did the commitment to nonplurality voting systems.

The threat of radicalism would remain a reliable barometer of elite interest in voting system reforms, rising and falling with the left's electoral prospects. When the national party system appeared to be set to crumble again just before the 1935 Depression-era election, and support for the just formed socialist Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) appeared to be increasing, the Liberals again promised to introduce a proportional voting system if elected. But once safely ensconced back in power with a majority government, the Liberals' promise was dispatched to a parliamentary committee that eventually decided against any reform. Then, in the 1940s, as the socially levelling pressures of war again appeared set to benefit the CCF, various federal politicians in both the Liberal and Conservative parties anxiously raised voting system reforms as a necessary fix to block socialism. But when the CCF breakthrough never came, such discussion ceased.

The threat posed by the CCF did produce some voting system reforms during this period. In Vancouver, the rapid organization and immediate popularity of the CCF in the early 1930s moved Vancouver's Liberal mayor to engineer a shift from ward voting to voting at large in the hopes that the

city's west side would swamp the CCF's voting base in the working-class east side. But, surprisingly, instead of sidelining the CCF, the reform led to an increase in CCF representation since they were the only coherent block of politicians running on one slate. Only when the city's business community organized a right-wing slate did they manage to push the CCF out of city hall (for more details, see Smith 1982). Fear that the CCF would capture government at the provincial level in British Columbia also motivated the rapid introduction of a new voting system in 1952, just before a scheduled provincial election. A coalition of the provincial Liberal and Conservative parties had run the province for a decade, winning two strong electoral victories by working together. But into the 1950s the political tensions of coalition were forcing the parties apart. The introduction of the majoritarian alternative vote was supposed to free the two parties to compete against each other without allowing the CCF to win power on a vote split between them. The plan worked—sort of. The CCF did not win the 1952 provincial election, but neither did the former coalition partners. Instead, an upstart, populist, right-wing party eked out a minority government, turning it into a majority one year later. Secure in government, Social Credit repealed the new voting system in 1955 (for more details, see Pilon 2010a).

By the mid-1950s, the left in Canada was appearing increasingly weak electorally, eclipsed by centrist parties that adopted just enough of their policy book to swing voters into their camp. Now voting system reform no longer appeared to be required to contain the left. Manitoba abandoned its unique PR/majority system in 1955, followed shortly by Alberta. Municipally, Calgary converted its STV system to AV in 1961, and then shifted to plurality in 1973, while Winnipeg dropped STV in a large municipal reorganization in 1972. Canada's key voting system reform era thus ended with a whimper, the reforms themselves quickly forgotten by the political class and largely ignored by political scientists.

Accommodating Difference, 1968–1992

The second period of interest in voting system reform in Canada would focus on accommodating political differences spatially. Alan C. Cairns opened the discussion in 1968, arguing that there was a major gap between the perception and reality of the workings of the SMP system as it functioned at the federal level. Canadian politics, he noted, was commonly held to be the "politics of moderation, or brokerage politics," an approach that would typically "minimize differences, restrain fissiparous tendencies, and thus over time help knit together the diverse interests of a polity weak in integration" (Cairns 1968, 63). But in reality Canada's voting system tended

to balkanize the electoral support of the two traditional national governing parties, leaving them dominating some areas of the country with little or no representation elsewhere. In fact, with the rise of third parties after 1921, SMP regularly overrepresented parties with regionally concentrated support, thus seeming to reward politicians who made localist and sectional appeals (Cairns 1968; Jansen and Siaroff 2004).

Cairns's intervention anticipated the new wave of regional politics that arose in the 1970s in both Quebec and Western Canada. The initial catalyst for a serious discussion of voting system reform was the election of the separatist Parti Québécois (PQ) in Quebec in 1976. With the possibility that the country might break up, elements of Canada's political elite were prepared to examine how new institutional arrangements might help avoid that outcome. The Pépin-Robarts Task Force on Canadian Unity proposed a new semi-proportional voting system in 1979, one that would add a significant number of party list Members of Parliament (MPs) to those elected in single-member ridings to better reflect the regional strengths of different parties (Canada 1979). In the same year, political scientist William Irvine (1979) offered a more fully proportional version of the mixed system touted by Pépin-Robarts for many of the same reasons, namely better regional representation.

The events in Quebec were not the only spur to action on voting system reform. Nationally, declining representation for the federal Liberals in Western Canada, combined with the ongoing underrepresentation of the NDP, led to some discussion of the issue in 1978 and again in 1981. After the federal election in 1980, NDP leader Ed Broadbent gained some interest from Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau to pursue adding a small number of PR seats to the House of Commons. But neither national unity nor election results could push the issue any further. When Quebec voters rejected separation in 1980, the political pressure for any institutional reform visibly slackened. Meanwhile, Broadbent found his national proposals for voting system reform vetoed by his own provincial party elites in Western Canada, who benefited occasionally from the disproportionalities of SMP in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba (Blight 1981).

Consideration of voting system reform continued to emerge sporadically into the 1980s. The PQ in Quebec was committed to PR as party policy, a legacy of their dramatic underrepresentation in their first electoral contests in 1970 and 1973. After their re-election in 1981, the issue was delegated to a committee that eventually recommended an MMP form of PR, but opposition within the government caucus vetoed the proposal (Grenier 2002). Western Canadian grievances continued to fuel interest in institutional reform, though most interest settled on the Senate rather than the voting system (Canada 1985; McCormick, Manning, and Gibson 1981). Discussion of

the voting system surfaced occasionally in the late 1980s and 1990s, linked mostly to proposals for Senate reform, but they went nowhere. A proposal to elect the senators by STV in the Charlottetown Accord did not survive a consultation with the premiers (Pierson et al. 1993, 327).

Where voting system reform did seem most likely to produce results during this period was in local politics, particularly in Vancouver and Winnipeg. Spatial issues played out at the municipal level in the late 1960s and early 1970s between suburbs and inner cities or between different neighbourhoods in terms of class, though not all focused their reform pressure on the voting system. In Montreal and Toronto, activists were able to stop various development projects by defeating the politicians who supported them (Magnusson and Sancton 1983). In other cases, like Winnipeg, a reforming provincial government sponsored a far-reaching local government reorganization to redress several historic grievances (Lightbody 1978b). In Vancouver, development and freeway issues led to the organization of a new urban political party—The Electors' Action Movement (TEAM)—that swept the mayoralty and council in the 1973 civic election. TEAM was also committed to replacing the city's "at large" multimember plurality voting system with a ward-based, SMP system, at least initially (Tennant 1980). Yet, despite considerable community organizing on the issue and six referenda over a span of three decades, various political forces were not able to reform the system (Pilon 2010a).

Concerns about national unity and regional/third-party underrepresentation at the federal level briefly put voting system reform on the agenda in the 1970s and early 1980s, but it did not lead to any changes. When Quebec voted to remain with Canada in 1980 and the West gained governing representation in the landslide federal Conservative majority in 1984, the twin crises fuelling the reform interest evaporated. The only reforms of the period occurred civically with the abolition of STV in Winnipeg and AV in Calgary, introduced by provincial governments less interested in voting systems than sweeping reforms to municipal governance.

Addressing the Democratic Deficit, 2000 to Present

A host of issues brought political reform back into the spotlight near the end of the twentieth century, though few singled out the voting system specifically. General complaints about a vague "democratic deficit" surfaced repeatedly. Critics pointed to a crisis of civic engagement with politics, specifically noting declining voter turnout and a seemingly broad public alienation from traditional political parties and politicians (Seidle 2002). These problems had been assessed in the far-reaching research reports of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (known colloquially as the Lortie Commission) in 1991, but their proposed reforms (e.g., a new voter registration system) had done little to stem the criticisms (Canada 1991). Other reform suggestions—the reform of Parliament, a relaxation of party discipline, Senate reform—had failed to gain any traction with political elites. In light of such reform stasis, various political activists began calling for an examination of Canada's voting systems precisely to change the behaviour of the political parties. Between 1997 and 2000, three different organizations (Fair Voting BC, Mouvement démocratie nouvelle, and Fair Vote Canada) were founded in three different parts of the country (British Columbia, Quebec, and Ontario) to promote voting system reform.

Canadian activists were inspired by reforms occurring in other countries. The modern period of Western voting system reform arguably began with France in the mid-1980s. The governing left coalition government had gained power while challenging the emerging neoliberal economic consensus, but quickly split over just how to respond to it. The Socialist president turned to voting system reform as a strategy to remake his political coalition, allowing him to dump his left while reaching out to the centre. The strategy didn't work, and the voting system reform itself proved short-lived, but the essential elements of the drive to reform would be present in all subsequent efforts to remake voting systems in other countries (Pilon 2013, 194–97). In Japan and Italy, voting system reform emerged as a strategy adopted by neoliberal reformers to break the deadlock blocking economic reforms. However, in New Zealand, those opposed to neoliberal economics and the way it had apparently captured both major political parties latched onto voting system reform as a means of opening up the policy debate. Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, Tony Blair used voting system reform at the sub- and supra-national level to divide and weaken regional competitors and further his control of his party's nomination process, all in the service of solidifying his ability to implement his neoliberal "third way" approach to social democracy (for more details, see Chapter 7 of Pilon 2013).

Ignoring the political and economic contexts that were fuelling them, reform activists in Canada simply took these international events as clear evidence that voting system change was possible. Grafting their reform proposals onto the various critiques of contemporary Canadian politics, reformers argued that a proportional voting system would improve political discourse, better represent what Canadians voted for, and improve the diversity of the representatives themselves (Fair Vote Canada 2003a). Several advocacy groups supported this latter theme, arguing that Canadian legislatures contained too few women and lagged in reflecting the racial and ethnic diversity of the country, particularly in urban areas (McPhedran and Speirs 2003). But arguably the key factor legitimizing this renewed focus on the voting

system could be found in the results of the elections themselves throughout the 1990s, specifically the gap between the votes parties secured and the seats they won. From its formation in 2000, the nationally focused FairVote Canada would use every election result as an opportunity to hammer home such discrepancies (FairVote Canada 2003b, 2006). Still, public knowledge of or interest in the voting system remained low (Bricker and Redfern 2001).

Yet just a few years later the voting system had seemingly taken off as reform topic in Canada. In 2004 the Law Commission of Canada produced a report calling for Parliament to adopt a proportional system (Law Commission of Canada 2004). In 2005, Paul Martin's Liberal government agreed to allow a special committee of the House of Commons to investigate the issue and consult with the public. In the same period, five provinces were engaged in exploring whether or not to adopt a new voting system. Amid such a flurry of activity, the question of reform appeared to be not if but when Canadians would get a proportional voting system. Reform activists with organizations like FairVote Canada were also confident that Canadian voters would readily embrace a more proportional voting system, if given the chance. As such they lobbied to remove politicians from the equation and put the question directly to the public in binding referenda (FairVote Canada 2005).

Optimism about the inevitability of change or faith that instruments of "direct democracy" would clearly deliver reform soon appeared misplaced. Indeed, with the failure of the second STV referendum in British Columbia in 2009, the window for discussion of voting system reform anywhere in Canada rapidly closed. This was due primarily to the elite nature of the discussion on the issue. Despite some media attention and an attempt at grassroots organizing by voting system activists, public interest in or knowledge of voting systems remained low throughout the period (LeDuc 2011). Reformers had failed to reach the public directly. Instead, they had temporarily gained an audience with media and different political elites for reasons that differed considerably from the ones reformers presented to the public. The millennial revival of interest in the voting system in Canada was due largely to party system instability at both the federal and provincial level. It emerged within parties as one tentative response among many to their present insecurity and uncertainty amid rapidly changing circumstances. Even then, it was usually couched as just a possibility, as something for the party to explore, and then usually by those outside the leadership circles.

Reform at the Federal Level

At the federal level, the 1993 election introduced a competitive dynamic on the right of the political spectrum that would fuel some interest in voting

system reform. In the 1993, 1997, and 2000 elections two right-wing parties vied for the same electorate, leading to vote-splits and losses for both. As both parties had geographic areas of strength and neither appeared willing to abandon the electoral field, right-wing supporters and activists across the country despaired that the Liberals would rule forever (Johnston 2001; Reid 2001). University of Calgary professor and Reform Party adviser Tom Flanagan promoted the majoritarian alternative vote as a strategy to allow right-wing voters to solve the problem (Flanagan 1999). Other right-wingers warmed to the idea of PR as a means of preserving pluralism on the right. Most on the right, however, advocated a merger of the two parties as the best solution. When that was accomplished in 2003, right-wing interest in voting system reform tapered off considerably.

The other federal parties faced different pressures to consider voting system reform. The federal NDP had previously exhibited some interest in the issue—not surprisingly given the party's perennial marginalization at the federal level. But attempts to speak to the issue in federal politics were usually checked by the Western provincial branches of the party that controlled the party's finances (and occasionally benefited from SMP). Instead, the party's strategy had always been to simply replace the Liberals as the alternative governing party at the federal level (see Blight 1981). The party's devastating result in the 1993 election—its weakest performance ever—seemed to expose how weak and unconvincing such a strategy was. Tensions arose throughout the 1990s as federal NDPers began to voice support for voting system reform despite opposition from provincial branches of the party. As such, the party's commitment to proportional voting remained weak at the turn of the century, even at the federal level, increasing somewhat only after federal election financing reforms effectively forced a separation of the provincial and federal wings of the party between 2004 and 2006 (Pilon, Ross, and Savage 2011). Under Jack Layton's leadership, the party's commitment to PR seemed to strengthen, with numerous attempts in the 2000s to raise the issue (MacDonald 2009; Wherry 2014). Surprisingly, as a regional party that benefited from SMP, the Bloc Québécois usually supported NDP motions for voting system reform, as did the Greens both outside Parliament and inside after their breakthrough in 2011.

As the beneficiaries of vote splitting on the right and the decline in support for the NDP, the federal Liberals were largely silent on the question of voting system reform throughout the 1990s. Occasionally this or that Liberal MP would voice support for the general principle (Bennett 2001), but on the whole Liberals defended SMP. Only when Paul Martin's Liberals were reduced to a minority government in 2004 and the party was wracked by internal divisions and embarrassing public scandals did they agree to

examine the question at the urging of the NDP (Reid 2005). Various delays meant that Martin's Liberals were defeated before they could deliver on their promise (Canada 2005a, 2005b). The subsequent Harper Conservative minority government elected in 2006 honoured the Liberal commitment to examine the voting system but farmed out the public consultation to a think tank with a record of opposition to any reform (Cheadle 2007). Not surprisingly, their report in 2007 recommended sticking with the status quo (Compas/Frontier Centre for Public Policy 2007).

Since 2004, the NDP commitment to voting system reform appears to have strengthened. MPs have regularly used opposition days to forward motions calling for more proportional voting, and the issue has been featured more prominently in party literature and leadership debates (Wherry 2014). But the party's approach typically differed from the citizen assembly/referenda approaches pursued at the provincial level, arguing that politicians had an important expertise to contribute and that elected MPs should make the decision about whether or not to adopt a new system (Reid 2005). Some concerns arose that this new commitment to PR might fade with the party's breakthrough in 2011 when it became the Official Opposition and displaced the Liberals as the second-largest party in the House of Commons (Gillis 2011). Instead, the party came out with its strongest statement on the issue yet, promising that if elected to government in 2015 it would introduce a PR system during its term in time to be used in the following election (Bolen 2015). Since their historic fall into third place federally in 2011, the Liberals have also debated voting systems, but they remain divided between supporters of a majority "ranked ballot" approach and those favouring PR (Pilon 2015). Then, in the run-up to the federal election in 2015, Justin Trudeau announced that, if elected, his party would replace SMP with something else, but remained vague on just what it would be (Geddes 2015). After his surprise election victory, Trudeau reiterated the promise to replace SMP (Benzie 2015).

Reform at the Provincial Level

At the provincial level, the events that catalyzed interest in voting system reform took several different forms. The most obvious were a series of anomalous election results—wrong winners, lopsided victories, rapid party system change—that had the effect of drawing public attention to the voting system and mobilizing some party activists to consider possible alternatives. But behind the scenes, party elites had other reasons to take voting system reform seriously. In British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec, the provincial Liberal parties had research that suggested each party faced an electoral

disadvantage vis-à-vis their main rival in terms of converting their popular vote into seats (Massicotte 2006, 8). Indeed, both BC and Quebec Liberals had lost a provincial campaign to "wrong winners" in the 1990s for precisely that reason. Thus, even though in both cases Liberal parties got more votes than their main rival, the "wrong winner" managed to win more seats. Meanwhile, in PEI and New Brunswick, Conservative governments were concerned that a trend where opposition parties consistently gained only marginal representation despite considerable levels of support would compromise the legitimacy of the legislature and the actions it tried to take. They too thought some form of voting system reform might address this issue (Cross 2005).

British Columbia

The provincial revival began with British Columbia's anomalous 1996 election result, where the BC Liberals lost despite gaining more votes than the re-elected NDP. The stunning defeat led to significant internal party debate about how to build a bigger coalition, one that could entice the remaining populist right-wingers to join them. A package of democratic reform initiatives—including a proposal to examine alternative voting systems—was put together before the 2001 election (Pilon, forthcoming). Meanwhile, NDP attempts to broker disputes between environmentalists, resource companies, and their workers created a rift in their electoral coalition, bolstering support for the provincial Green Party. As the NDP weathered repeated scandal, resignations, and a largely hostile media, it too claimed to be interested in voting system reform (BC NDP 2001). As the next election approached, it appeared that all parties—BC Liberals, NDP, and Greens—were prepared to consider a new way to vote.

The 2001 provincial election featured another anomalous result, though with a different victim. The BC Liberals won 57 per cent of the popular vote and 77 of the province's 79 seats, while the NDP was reduced to just 2 seats. The Greens gained 12 per cent of the vote (up from 2 per cent in the previous election) but no representation. The results once again underlined seemingly perverse workings of the voting system in translating votes into seats. The governing Liberals moved quickly on several of their democratic reform promises, though the voting system reform issue was delayed until the government passed the halfway mark of their term. The BC Citizens' Assembly (BCCA) comprised randomly selected citizens who studied, debated, devised, and then proposed a new voting system for the province (Warren and Pearse 2008). As promised, the government agreed to put the proposal before the public in a referendum that would accompany the next provincial

election. Premier Gordon Campbell was lauded by academics and pundits alike as a champion of democratic reform for sponsoring the BCCA and putting its STV proposal to the public (Pilon, forthcoming). But this ignored the government's fine print on the referendum process. For instance, after spending nearly $5 million on the BCCA process, the government refused to fund a serious public education campaign to let the public know what they would be voting on. In addition, the government insisted that reform would require a super-majority to pass—60 per cent of the total votes cast and a majority in 60 per cent of the ridings—despite the fact that previous voting system reforms in British Columbia had passed with a simple majority (Pilon 2010a). Confident that the public cared little about voting systems, few commentators thought the referendum would pass.

The referendum results surprised political elites—nearly 58 per cent of voters endorsed the BCCA's proposal. STV supporters quickly demanded that the government introduce the reform in light of such strong support (Gibson 2005), but critics complained that the public didn't understand what they were voting for and were simply using the referendum to strike a blow against the political class (Simpson 2005; Spector 2005). Survey research seemed to confirm that few voters understood what STV was or how it worked, with many voting in favour simply because they had positive feelings toward the BCCA (Cutler and Fournier 2008). But surveys also confirmed some interesting partisan trends. In 2005, STV gained strong support from Green and NDP voters, with a considerable number of Liberals also supporting change (Carty, Cutler, and Fournier 2009). Given the instability in BC's party system over the previous decade this was not surprising—supporters of all parties were worried about how SMP might wrong-foot their party, again. Meanwhile, the parties themselves had said little publicly about the BCCA or the referendum during the 2005 election campaign for fear of alienating the public, leaving their supporters with few partisan cues about how to vote.

The government would not budge on introducing STV but did agree to hold another referendum in 2009, this time with funding for public education. STV supporters celebrated, thinking they had four years to come up with another 2 per cent in support and win. But 2009 reversed the results of 2005—now only 39 per cent of voters were prepared to embrace change. Several factors contributed to this result. First, the public funding for education was ineffective, ending up in the hands of pro- and anti-STV campaigns that mostly attacked each other. Survey work would confirm that the public remained largely ignorant about the referendum options or the issues germane to their decision (Carty et al. 2009). Second, both Liberal and NDP politicians were less reticent about sharing their views about STV

in 2009, with many clearly stating their opposition to change (Pilon 2010b). Finally, the election results of 2005, which had signalled a return to "normal" two-party competition, had gone some way to calming the fears of Liberal and NDP partisans. Voting system reform no longer seemed necessary as a kind of insurance against anomalous election results.

Quebec

Quebec had a similar starting point for its most recent explorations of voting system reform: an anomalous election result. In the 1998 provincial election, the Quebec Liberal Party got the most votes but lost to the Parti Québécois. But the previous election had also produced highly unrepresentative results: the Liberals trailed the PQ in 1994 by less than 1 per cent but won 30 fewer seats. As a result, several community groups organized publicly in the late 1990s to demand some form of PR be introduced provincially (Cliche 1999; Mouvement démocratie nouvelle 2014). By 2001 all three major parties claimed to be committed to reforming the voting system. In December 2001 the Standing Committee on Institutions of the National Assembly embarked on an exploration of the voting system, hearing from various experts about different possible models for reform, with many endorsing some form of compensatory additional member system. These pressures led the PQ government to agree to establish an Estates-General focused on the voting system. After much citizen and expert consultation, they too recommended the province adopt a compensatory voting system with some element of PR (Quebec 2003). However, three days after the report was submitted, the PQ called a provincial election—a contest they ultimately lost. Still, the momentum for reform survived as the new Liberal administration announced that they would reform the voting system during their term in office (Charest 2003).

Liberal interest in a new voting system was undoubtedly motivated by the party's struggle to regain power in the 1990s. The problem was their vote was too regionally concentrated, resulting in huge wins in some ridings and narrow losses in others. However, only four months later it was clear that the government's zeal for reform had weakened when it announced that a reformed voting system would not be in place for the next election. The Liberals did present a bill in December 2004 proposing a less-than-proportional mixed system of voting (Massicotte 2006, 21). Critics commended the government for bringing forward a concrete proposal but were unhappy that the system would not achieve more proportional results (Mouvement démocratie nouvelle 2004). A Select Committee on the Election Act was formed in June 2005 to review the legislation, and it in turn established a

Citizens' Committee to respond to the legislation and the work of the committee. Again, a significant amount of public and expert consultation took place. In April 2006, the Citizens' Committee presented their report, essentially arguing that the government's proposal was not proportional enough. A month later the Select Committee made its report, agreeing that a mixed compensatory system was desirable but admitting that committee members could not agree on precisely how proportional it should be (L'Écuyer and Lemay 2006). In opening a new session of the legislature in March 2006, Charest again underlined his government's commitment to introducing a new voting system with a "proportional element" (Charest 2006).

By the fall of 2006 opposition to reforming the voting system from within the Liberal caucus ground the process to a halt. Bolstering this position was strong opposition from local government officials who worried that PR would weaken the influence of regional interests (Cliche 2007). In December 2006, the government referred the issue to the province's chief electoral officer for input. After a year of study, his report basically supported the more proportional options promoted by the critics of the government's initial bill (Quebec 2007). However, while producing his report the political dynamics blocking reform appeared to shift considerably. In a provincial election held in March 2007, the Liberal government was reduced to a minority, thus at least theoretically increasing the chances that opposition parties could pressure the government to act on its promise to reform the voting system. As the three major parties elected in 2007 had previously publicly committed to some form of compensatory PR, reform seemed possible.

That reform did not occur can most likely be attributed to the increasing instability in the party system and some serious miscalculations on the part of a few key politicians. The rise of the Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ) did not please either the Liberals or the PQ, whose interest in voting system reform was primarily to bolster their own electoral position, not increase the competitive dynamic of the political system. In the late 1990s, the PQ thought the issue could corral a few more floating voters into their sovereignty camp, thus their party program commitment to a new voting system in 2001 was fairly straightforward. By 2006 the party was hedging its bets, suggesting that a new voting system would have to wait until after sovereignty was achieved. In 2011, the commitment to voting system reform was removed from the party program altogether. Meanwhile, the taste of power between 2003 and 2007 had tempered Liberal enthusiasm for voting system reform—Charest's inaugural speech as head of a minority government in 2007 failed to mention it (Mouvement démocratie nouvelle 2014).

Only the recent third party—the ADQ—had remained steadfast in their support, at least until the results of the 2007 election came in. Though born

of frustration with the Quebec Liberal Party, the ADQ often drew protest votes from across the political spectrum, gaining a seat in the legislature in 1994 and moderately increasing its vote share in subsequent elections in 1998 and 2003. But in the 2007 contest its support spiked dramatically, jumping to 31 per cent of the popular vote, up from 18 per cent previously. More importantly, the surge in support allowed it to surpass the PQ as the Official Opposition. Now the party that had long been the strongest advocate of PR suddenly seemed less interested (Cliche 2007). Instead of using the minority government situation to secure voting system reform, the ADQ tried to solidify its position as the second party and potential alternative government to the Liberals. The strategy backfired when Charest called a snap election in December 2008 and regained his governing majority, while ADQ support slipped back to its traditional levels and the PQ returned to second place and the Official Opposition.

Post-2008 attempts by activist groups to get the reform moving failed to gain any traction with the major parties: both the Liberals and the PQ now refused to endorse voting system reform. Even the ADQ could not bring its historical commitment to PR with it in 2012 when it merged with the new third party—Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ). At that point, only the small left-wing Québec solidaire continued to champion a more proportional voting system. Attempts to dislodge the voting system via various court challenges also failed (Mouvement démocratie nouvelle 2014). However, after losing ground in the 2014 election, the CAQ also called for a new voting system (Croteau 2015).

Ontario

Interest in voting system reform first emerged in the Ontario NDP in the late 1990s and then in the Ontario Liberal Party at the turn of century, both developments related to the dramatic party system changes witnessed in the province over the previous decade and half. The Ontario PCs' 42-year dynasty in government ended abruptly in 1985 when a Liberal minority, supported by the NDP, pushed them out of office. The Liberals later turned that into a majority in 1987, but then shockingly lost office to the NDP in 1990. The NDP term of government proved tumultuous, as the party found itself unable to fulfill the expectations of its own traditional supporters or the vote switchers that had help propel them into office, especially given the cuts to transfer payments for social programs from the federal government. The backlash against the party helped fuel a populist rebooting of the PCs under Mike Harris. As Harris enacted radical slash-and-burn cuts to government, with apparent public support (at least at first), both New Democrat

and Liberal parties began to consider whether voting system reforms would benefit them.

For New Democrats, PR began bubbling up in various branches of the party in the mid- to late 1990s, first from those unhappy with the party's electoral strategy of moving closer to the political centre, but later from some of the "modernizers" as well as a way of disciplining its supporters and making coalitions with other parties more effective. Gilles Bisson and former Bob Rae cabinet minister Tony Silipo began raising the issue in caucus and with the party in 1998, and this was later passed as party policy in 1999 (Pilon 2004, 251–53). For Liberals, voting system reform emerged from policy workshops that preceded the 2002 provincial election. The party created five themes to campaign on, including democratic reform. Dalton McGuinty even appeared at a Fair Vote Canada event in 2003, publicly promising to sponsor a citizens' assembly on the issue and hold a referendum on a new proposed voting system if one was forthcoming (Pilon 2004, 256). Thus Liberal support amounted to agreeing to a process to consider reform; they did not endorse change or an alternative voting system. The SMP system had clearly not worked in their favour—they had barely gained office in the previous half-century despite nearly always being the main opposition. But as public opposition to the Harris PCs appeared to increase, Liberals were feeling confident that the coming election was winnable. Committing to a process allowed the party to claim the populist democratic reform mantle, and hopefully draw any voters keen on it without necessarily having to act on it.

After their election victory in 2003, the Liberals delivered on their promise of mounting a citizens' assembly and holding a referendum on the voting system. However, as in British Columbia, the fine print doomed the exercise to failure. Drawing from the BC experience, the Ontario Liberals also insisted on a super-majority rule for the referendum to pass, failed to educate the public about the vote or its substance, and blocked the parties from campaigning on the issue. In the end, Ontario's citizens' assembly recommended the province adopt an MMP form of PR. The media were relentless in their opposition to changing the voting system, discrediting the citizens' assembly and their work and failing to present a balanced view of the referenda or its choices during the 2007 provincial campaign (Pilon 2007, 103; 2009). Surveys demonstrated that the public was largely unaware a referendum was taking place, let alone what it was about (Cutler and Fournier 2007). With low information, only 37 per cent of voters in Ontario endorsed the change. With the result, the newly re-elected Dalton McGuinty announced that voting system reform was no longer a priority for his government, while the NDP would remain at least nominally supportive of the issue.

Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick

Voting system reform emerged in Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick from different parties and for different reasons than in other parts of the country. Conservatives rather than Liberals were the driving force in examining the voting system and were motivated by a different kind of anomalous election result. In both provinces, the previous few decades had produced several elections where the opposition parties barely achieved any representation in the legislatures. Indeed, in 1986 the opposition parties in New Brunswick were shut out entirely, despite gaining 40 per cent of the popular vote. The two provinces also chose to explore the question in different ways, eschewing the publicly driven citizens' assembly and Estates-General models used in other provinces for a more traditional expert-driven commission approach. Both processes produced recommendations for adopting the MMP form of PR and putting the choice before the public in a referendum.

Voting system reform first got a hearing in PEI as part of the reorganization of the province's electoral map in 1994. A court challenge had struck down the old map and its two-member district system that had survived since Confederation. The commission tasked with creating a new single-member riding system did hear from several participants that a proportional voting system would be a better option (Prince Edward Island 2003, 25). A special committee of the legislature in 2000 that reviewed the Election Act also recommended exploring PR (26). The legislature then directed the province's chief electoral officer to study and report back. This report (Prince Edward Island 2001) informed the government's decision to appoint a one-man commission in January 2003. In December of that year it recommended an MMP form of PR. The commissioner also called for further public consultation, perhaps in the form of a citizens' assembly, to work out the details of the model and a referendum process so the proposal could be put to a vote (Prince Edward Island 2003, 98–100). A year later the government chose instead to appoint a 10-member commission, which reported in May 2005 with the detailed model of an MMP voting system, the rules for a referendum, and the question that would be put to the public (Lea 2006).

At that point, under pressure from his caucus, the premier departed from the recommendations of his commissions and moved to hold the referendum in the fall of 2005, a nonelection year, with a super-majority rule for any change to pass (the second commission had recommended 50 per cent plus 1), no serious attempt to educate the public about the issue, and with only a fraction of the island's traditional voting locations open (Lea 2006). PEI political scientist Peter McKenna (2006) observed that it "looked like the

entire electoral reform process—from start to finish—was more an exercise in public relations and political symbolism than an honest and forthright effort at purposeful and fundamental electoral reform on PEI." Not surprisingly, turnout for the referendum (unlike regular provincial elections) was low—only about 30 per cent—and the MMP proposal gained only 36 per cent of the vote.

New Brunswick appointed an eight-person commission in December 2003 to examine a host of issues related to modernizing the province's electoral system. A year later they submitted a report covering a broad range of topics and recommended reforms, including a proposal to adopt an MMP form of PR (New Brunswick 2004). The government responded in June 2006, agreeing to hold a referendum on the voting system proposal concurrent with the next provincial election, due in May 2008 (New Brunswick 2006). But a snap election in the fall of 2006 led to the defeat of the government before a referendum could be held. The new government offered its own responses to the commission's report in June 2007, arguing that reforming the voting system was too radical and opting instead to simply improve the existing system through better districting and by creating incentives for parties to diversify their candidates running for office (New Brunswick 2007).

The failure to carry out the different commission recommendations in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island suggests that the proposals proved to be too radical for their sponsors. The Conservative premiers were looking for a way to secure a reliable representation of the opposition, not necessarily shift away from single-party majority governments or make their systems more competitive. When their commissions exceeded such modest expectations, caucus opposition and political self-interest subverted the process. Still, when the provincial elections in PEI and Nova Scotia produced anomalous results in 2015, the premiers of both provinces volunteered to examine different methods of voting as one response to public complaints, though expert commentators were not optimistic (McKenna 2015).

Reform at the Municipal Level

Municipal voting system reform since 2000 had been, until recently, mostly restricted to a debate between single-member and multimember plurality or a "ward" versus an "at large" system. Vancouver's seemingly never-ending debate over its voting system culminated in a stand-alone referendum on the issue in 2004. In the past, the results of different plebiscites on the issue had been marred by disagreement about the proper voting threshold to effect change and disputes between different political parties and levels

of government (Berger 2004, 13–17). But by 2004 the referendum was sponsored by its long-time advocate, the Coalition of Progressive Electors (COPE) slate (which had won the mayoralty and control of council in 2002), without interference from the provincial government and with a threshold of just 50 per cent plus 1 to make the change. Yet the initiative failed, gaining only 46 per cent of the vote. COPE had to bear some of the blame for the loss—the decision to hold the referendum in a nonelection year pretty much ensured low voter turnout, particularly among their core working class and poor electorate. On the other hand, as was apparent in the previous referendum on the issue in the 1990s, the old consensus favouring wards as the sole alternative to the at large system had broken down, with some reformers now demanding a proportional system for the city (Tennant and West 1998a, 1998b). The issue of wards versus at large has also emerged in a few Ontario towns since 2000, notably Niagara Falls and Oshawa (Spiteri 2014; Zochodne 2014).

Perhaps the most surprising development at the local level was the grassroots campaign to change the voting system for Toronto city council from its traditional SMP system to the majoritarian alternative vote, dubbed "ranked ballots" by its promoters. The issue gained traction against a backdrop of ongoing mayoral misbehaviour on the part of the city's populist right-wing mayor, Rob Ford. The argument that a ranked ballot would ensure that the anti-Ford vote in any future election would not split between rival candidates was taken up approvingly by most political commentators and endorsed by media outlets like the *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star* (*Globe and Mail* 2014; *Toronto Star* 2013). Ranked ballot organizers secured high-level meetings with both municipal and provincial politicians, culminating in a promise from the premier to pass legislation allowing local councils to adopt ranked ballots (Benzie 2014), with the province preparing enabling legislation over the summer of 2015. Interestingly, with Rob Ford sidelined back to a council seat and his brother's loss in the mayoral contest, the pressure on Toronto city council to change its voting system seemed to slacken as the council suddenly (and surprisingly, to many observers) voted against adopting ranked ballots in October 2015 (*Toronto Star* 2015).

The modern period of voting system reform has been the most widespread the country has ever seen in terms of jurisdiction and geography. Five provinces invested considerable time and resources into researching the issue, and all produced reports that recommended dropping SMP in favour of some form of PR. At the national level, the voting system gained attention (at least in terms of debate) that it had not seen since the 1920s. But nowhere did reform actually occur. This is because the publicly stated rationales for

reform—the democratic deficit, bettering demographic representation, making votes count—were not the real forces pushing consideration of new voting systems. The real impetus behind moving the issue up the agenda was party system instability at both the federal and provincial levels. And when the instability dissipated, or the price of reform appeared too high, politicians lost interest or put the brakes on the reform process.

Conclusion

Canada's voting system is a largely foreign device to most of its citizens, despite their regular interaction with it at every electoral opportunity. As William Irvine once noted, "Election results in Canada are usually accepted, if only because few Canadians bother to think that the results could have been other than what they were." Former BC politician and indefatigable STV proponent Nick Loenen (1995) cited this quote in an early foray into the most recent era of voting system reform as a call to educate the public and rally them to demand reform. Two decades later, despite gaining some attention from media and policymakers and securing four referenda on the issue, the reformers' efforts must be judged as a failure. Educating the public about voting systems and mobilizing them to action proved too difficult. The reformers were usually part-time activists, poorly resourced, and not well connected to the traditional elite channels of Canadian political discourse and organization. Meanwhile, their opponents—typically the media and the mainstream political parties—had considerable resources and connections to deploy when studied indifference wasn't enough. In the end, reformers could not do an end run around what the governing political parties wanted—and in each case what these parties wanted always proved to be most decisive.

Canada's traditional plurality voting system has been challenged throughout Canadian history, but rarely successfully. The character of the challenge has been crucial. The themes of reformers have changed, from demands for particular kinds of representation in the early twentieth century, to better regional representation in the 1970s and 1980s, to a remedy for the country's democratic deficit post-2000. But underlying the public rhetoric has always been party interests. Only in the first reform era would those interests feel threatened enough to agree to voting system reforms, and those threats involved competition from political forces perceived as economically threatening—not merely to this or that entity but to the political system as whole. By contrast, regionalism or democratic malaise or even considerable party system instability were storms to be weathered. They were not threatening enough to secure changes to the voting system.

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