

Democratic stability, representation, and accountability: a case for single-member plurality elections in Canada

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Should we change our electoral system? I argue that we should not. To begin, I argue that what we should want – what we should prioritize – in our electoral system are three related characteristics: stability and long-term viability, responsiveness, and accountability. Because democracy is precious and because free and fair elections are central to democracy, we should want an electoral system which is robust against breakdown. Because citizens' preferences and interests matter, then we should want an electoral system which leads to responsive governments. Finally, because politicians are not perfect, we should want a political system which allows for citizens to punish and remove underperforming politicians.

In this chapter, I argue first that Canada's electoral system has proven robust against breakdown, despite a difficult starting position. I then argue that on grounds of democratic responsiveness, a plurality system such as Canada's performs as well as a proportional representation system. Finally, I argue that given the deep flaws of voters, we should want an electoral system which does not reward appeals to the worst nature of people while still allowing them to hold governments accountable. On this score, Canada's current system once again performs well.

The robustness of our electoral system

The first criteria on which we might evaluate our federal electoral system is its robustness against breakdown or what Nassim Taleb calls "anti-fragility"¹ I argue that the best evidence we have for the anti-fragility of a system is its tenure and its ability to incrementally rather than radically reform in response to existential threats.

Tenure can be assessed through a simple counting exercise, and Canada performs well if we take this approach. Canadian representatives have been chosen by democratic means without interruption since Confederation in 1867. Our first peaceful transfer of power occurred just four years later. Only two countries have a longer record of democratic selection and peaceful transition²: the United Kingdom (since 1660 with the crowning of Charles II and the assertion of

¹ Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. *Antifragile: Things that gain from disorder*. Vol. 3. Random House Incorporated, 2012.

² I acknowledge here that the standard of what is democratic has thankfully increased over time. Limited franchises and property requirements are, by objective standards, undemocratic. I wish to avoid, however, the argument about whether a country which did not have universal suffrage could be considered democratic, for two reasons. First, there is no clear difference between PR and non-PR countries on this measure. Most nearly every country has gradually expanded its understanding of what it means to be democratic. Second, if we wish to look back on countries and suggest that they are not democracies because they excluded one or another group in the past, we should be ready to acknowledge that no country today is democratic, given that in the future we may well think it abhorrent to prevent children from voting, or non-citizen residents of

Parliamentary supremacy) and the United States (arguably in 1801, with the first transfer of power from Adams to Jefferson). Of course, countries have not faced equally difficult circumstances, so one might reasonably object, for example, that the suspension of the democratic selection of leaders in various European countries in the Second World War says nothing at all about the robustness of their democratic institutions; rather, it is merely a case of breakdown after invasion and occupation by a foreign force. This is fair enough, though it perhaps unnecessarily downplays the pressures towards the suspension of democratic norms that have faced Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom over the past century and a half.

One might also argue that such a counting exercise is meaningless, as Canada began from an advantageous position. From the beginning, it had a strong economic base, a set of basic democratic norms in its political culture, and no great shadow of the past hanging over its politics. Compared to more complex places, it had much better starting position. Surely, it is no great achievement for Canada to have maintained democratic selection of leaders and to have staved off breakdown. Such an argument, however, ignores two broad sets of facts. First, Canada's starting position was a difficult one – political survival was never assured. Second, Canada's political system has been in a state of constant if modest reform to address the fundamental, genetic³ challenges that it faces.

On the first point, consider the following stylized facts about Canada. First, Canada's starting position was one of deep divisions between people. Those divisions were over matters fundamental to self- and group-understanding. From the beginning, Canada was populated by Catholics and Protestants, with the latter group occasionally divided internally over important debates. Overlaid on this were ethnic and linguistic divisions, sometimes organized neatly together and other times not. To begin, divisions were between the French, Irish, and British, the last group having its own internal divisions to boot; then, further divisions sometimes emerged with the addition of German-speaking and east European immigrants through the late 19th century. In the shadow of all of this were objectively awful actions towards aboriginal Canadians. Divisions of identity were not the only ones. Economic interests were often directly opposed in some parts of the country over others. The interests of the commercial class in the Maritime Provinces diverged from those in central Canada. With the eventual opening of the west and the explosion of Prairie agriculture, the interests of exporting farmers came up directly against the protectionist preferences of manufacturing interests in central Canada.

Such social divisions can often find expression in political parties.⁴ However, the political system places sharp limits on the number of parties that can be expected to reasonably compete.

a country, or even perhaps non-citizen non-residents. In short, democracy is an expanding concept, but we can still classify countries by the standards of their time.

³ By this, I mean the fundamental challenges that face a country as a result of political decisions made about its institutions and laws at the time of its founding.

⁴ Lipset, Seymour M., and Stein Rokkan. "Cleavage structures, party systems, and voter alignments: an introduction." (1967): 1-64.

The canonical findings here are those of Duverger⁵ and, most centrally, Cox⁶. Duverger noted that majoritarian systems (like Canada's) tend towards a smaller number of parties (he said two), while proportional systems generate multiple parties. Cox articulated the conditions under which the multiplication of parties increased, characterizing it as a joint function of two factors: first, an electoral system which does not punish smaller parties; second, multiple salient social divisions. Clearly, this later condition obtained in Canada from the start. Much is often made of the fact that Canada is not "Israel or Italy".⁷ I take this to mean that if Canada had adopted a system of proportional representation, it would not display the fragmentation and occasional sclerosis of those two political systems. The comparative data and serious analytical work suggests something different. In a more permissive electoral system, we have good reason to believe that Canada would have fragmented into a large number of political parties make not only regional appeals, but also those appealing directly to identity. Such is the tinder to the fire of identity politics.

The consequence of political parties fragmented along ethnic and confessional lines was obvious to early observers of Canadian politics, not least the French social scientist André Seigfried, who undertook a comprehensive early account of the Canadian party system⁸:

*Aware of the sharpness of certain rivalries, they [the major political parties] know that if these are let loose without any counter-balance, the unity of the Dominion may be endangered. That is why they persistently apply themselves to prevent the formation of homogeneous parties, divided according to race, religion or class—a French party, for instance, or a Catholic party, or a Labour party. The clarity of political life suffers from this, but perhaps the existence of the federation can be preserved only at this price.*⁹

Johnston provides clear examples of the efforts of parties to contain rather than exploit such deep divisions, even when they directly pitted some groups against others.¹⁰ On matters as diverse as "the disposition of Jesuits' Estates in Quebec; the Manitoba schools controversy; and Northwest schools", national party leaders "stroved to contain the passions, as each electoral coalition embodied conflicting forces".¹¹ As he notes, "Provincial politicians and provincially-minded federal ones rubbed at sectarian sores, as did extra-parliamentary groups...", but "neither Macdonald nor Laurier sought to exploit them even covertly."¹² This was not just a matter of

⁵ Duverger, Maurice. *Political parties: Their organization and activity in the modern state*. Methuen, 1959.

⁶ Cox, Gary W. *Making votes count: Strategic coordination in the world's electoral systems*. Vol. 7. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

⁷ See, for example, Peter Russell's testimony to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform, available here: <http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/HOC/Committee/421/ERRE/Brief/BR8391090/br-external/RussellPH-e.pdf>.

⁸ Seigfried, Andre, and Frank H. Underhill. *The race question in Canada*. No. 29. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 1966.

⁹ Seigfried, pages 113-114, as quoted in Richard Johnston, "An Analytical History of the Canadian Party System", unpublished manuscript, ND.

¹⁰ Johnston, ND.

¹¹ Johnston, ND, pg 134.

¹² Johnston, ND, pg 134.

norms. It was a matter of responding to the electoral and governance incentives of our electoral system.

Critics of our electoral system often note the occasionally regional nature of some parties. Let us take them at their word that the concentrated expression of regional grievances within regional parties is a normatively bad thing. Two facts should not be ignored. First, regional parties which wish to experience governing invariably need to stop being regional. Those that do not are often punished by voters, though perhaps too slowly. Those who do wish to govern most often find themselves putting water in their wine as they broaden out their coalitions or collapse into other parties altogether. Second, the historical record is clear: in the 33 elections since 1904, the party which has won the most seats in most of Canada's five regions has formed government on 27 occasions¹³. In short, parties which resist the well-known temptations to fragment and instead pursue the building of a diverse, permanent, national voter base are those who are most likely to form government. Our electoral system just might have something to do with the ability of our politics to resist the temptation to fall into fragmentation, regional grievance, and zero-sum national politics.

Critics of our current electoral system have misunderstood how effective it is in limiting party fragmentation. By ignoring the counterfactual of how fragmented the system would be under a different system, they mistakenly identify our limited regional parties as a failure, rather than as evidence of success. Critics have also given insufficient due to how other institutions have evolved to address concerns of a regional matter. Our electoral system is just one element of our system of federal political representation. Focusing only on it and ignoring other institutions misses the second important element of our national political institutions. Namely, while our electoral system has remained essentially unchanged¹⁴, other practices have emerged to better address national needs of representation. For example, when assembling cabinets, Prime Ministers used to give careful consideration both to regional balance and to religious and ethnic balance within regions. This has evolved appropriately over time, with various ethnic groups moving up or down the pecking order, while religion has largely disappeared as a basis for cabinet membership. At a higher level, the practice of federalism has evolved, for example in the creation of provincial secretariats and in meetings between first ministers.¹⁵ Finally, at moments of acute crisis, we have considered massive overhauls to our constitutional structure, though for better or for worse these have been rejected. All of this is just to say that our system of political representation has evolved over time to address the unique needs of our country. This recommends against radical reform of the central institution for at least two reasons. First, comparative evidence on how the whole system will react to a change of a central component is uninformative, as no other country has the same set unique and slowly-constructed institutions that we do. Second, in the choice between slow evolution and exogenous shock, we should only

¹³ I am indebted here to personal correspondence with Richard Johnston, who provided this data point.

¹⁴ For an account of the few instances of successful electoral reform in Canada, see Jansen, Harold John. "The Single Transferable Vote in Alberta and Manitoba." PhD diss., University of Alberta, 1998.

¹⁵ Cameron, David, and Richard Simeon. "Intergovernmental relations in Canada: The emergence of collaborative federalism." *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 32, no. 2 (2002): 49-72.

choose the latter if we believe we are cleverer than evolution. We are not.¹⁶

Single-party government and effective representation

A second basic consideration when evaluating an electoral system is its ability to translate the preferences and interests of voters into policy. Absent this function, the advantage of democracy is less clear. I argue that our electoral system and the governments it produces allow for the effective representation of public preferences while also allowing for the maneuvering room necessary to pursue fundamental policy reforms.

There is a common tradeoff expressed in the literature on electoral systems, perhaps best articulated by Powell.¹⁷ In this account, choosing an electoral system is about optimizing across two dimensions, which largely exist in trade off with one another. The first is representation, broadly understood as the translation of voters' political preferences into legislative representation and eventually policy. The second is effectiveness and accountability, which can be understood as the ability of governments to set out and pursue clear policy agendas (effectiveness) and for voters to know which party was responsible for policy decisions (and failures) in the next election (accountability). I address the accountability element more in the next section.

Why would there be better political representation in a proportional representation system? First, because proportional systems are less punishing of small parties, they are more likely to be present in a legislature. This is an empirical reality.¹⁸ With a greater diversity of parties comes a greater diversity of views. However, this is only one stage in many.¹⁹ A government has to be formed from among those parties. Again, the empirical regularity is uncontroversial: proportional systems are more likely to lead to coalition governments (whether a minority or a majority)²⁰ and those coalitions likely represent a majority of voters. We can compare this with plurality systems, where a party often wins a majority of seats and thus all government power with sometimes far less than a majority of the vote. Coalition governments in a proportional system will form on the basis of a majority of votes; they will then negotiate over a policy agenda which will balance the priorities of the coalition partners. In theory, this is thought to produce policy outputs which are closer to the median voter and/or average ideal point. Advocates of proportional systems will contrast this with a plurality system, where a party elected to a majority with four in ten votes may then pursue policy some distance from the

¹⁶ Chris Cochrane was the first to introduce me to Orgell's Second Rule: "Evolution is cleverer than you are." It is discussed clearly in Daniel Dennett, 1995, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meaning of Life*, New York: Touchstone, p.74. The central intuition here is that things built up through trial and error contain much more wisdom than anything that is centrally imagined and planned.

¹⁷ Powell, G. Bingham. *Elections as instruments of democracy: Majoritarian and proportional visions*. Yale University Press, 2000.

¹⁸ Cox, 1997.

¹⁹ Golder, Matt, and Benjamin Ferland. "Electoral Rules and Citizen-Elite Ideological Congruence." Working paper, available at: <http://mattgolder.com/files/research/congruence.pdf>.

²⁰ Blais, André, Peter Loewen, and Maxime Ricard. "The Government Life Cycle." *Democratic Reform in New Brunswick*, 2007.

average voter's ideal point.

It is on this basis that many advocates of proportionality make their case. However, this account ignores three other empirical regularities. First, policy does not result directly from the expression of voters' preferences in an election.²¹ The parties which form a coalition government need to come to an agreement over which policies will be pursued. In this negotiation process, there is no guarantee that power is divided with perfect proportionality between these parties. To the extent that it is not, distortions in policy outputs can occur, moving policy away from the ideal point of the average voters. Second, public preferences change. In light of events, what citizens want can often change and dramatically so. Because coalitions are often built on lock tight policy agreements and mutual monitoring of coalition partners, it may well be the case that coalition governments are not able to respond to changing preferences with sufficient speed. So, while they may be closer to the average voter at the start of a mandate, it is not apparent that they can track changes in voters' preferences with any ease. Third, it is an empirical fact that governments do not last as long in PR systems.²² This is not a result of more frequent elections, but instead of mid-election changes in first ministers or, more relevant to this argument, in the complement of parties forming the coalition. What do such changes say about policy congruence? It seems unlikely that governments would change merely to enact the same suite of policies as the previous government. So, perhaps new governments are formed to move closer to the average voter's ideal point, but for this to be true the previous government would need to be off that ideal point.

Consider now policy representation under the single party governments which are the norm in plurality systems. Such governments are unquestionably powerful, often to the point of abuse.²³ However, with power comes greater room to maneuver. A single party majority elected on one platform might be supported by only a minority of the population. However, they can without fear of immediate sanction move closer to the average voter's ideal point, especially given the lack of a constraining coalition agreement. Moreover, such governments are also able to swiftly pursue major policy reforms without fear of losing government before the next election. In the Canadian case, we need only think of the Goods and Services Tax, the aggressive deficit reduction in Jean Chretien's first mandate, or the phase out of income trusts in Stephen Harper's first term. Such decisions were objectively good on efficiency and equity grounds, but were both politically unpopular and largely contrary to party policy. Perhaps such policies would have been passed under coalition governments. Certainly, PR countries are not free of examples of political courage. But it certainly does seem easier to make such moves in just the kind of single-party governments which result in plurality systems.

Until now, my argument has been largely one of hypothetical propositions. What do the data say on this point? A long line of work in political science examines the connection between the preferences of voters and the composition of governments and, sometimes, the policies they

²¹ Golder and Ferland.

²² Blais et al 2007.

²³ Simpson, Jeffrey. *The friendly dictatorship*. McClelland & Stewart, 2011.

enact.²⁴ Earlier work often found a representation advantage for proportional representation.²⁵ However, other often more current work suggests that there is simply not much overall difference between proportional and plurality countries.²⁶ Importantly, this is true both at the beginning of a mandate and at the end. Why proportional systems do not outperform majoritarian is not entirely clear, though it is reasonable to assume that it has something to do with the flexibility of coalition governments.

Accountability and the limits of voters

Until this point, I have argued at two levels of analysis. First, by considering the long-run performance of Canadian democracy, I have argued that Canada's majoritarian system performs well on something of a whole-system level. Second, by considering the representation of voters' preferences, I've examined the system at the level of the behaviour of parties and governments. Finally, I wish to examine our electoral system at the level of voters. There are three main arguments here. First, voters have severely limited capacities and we should approach these with sufficient realism. Second, voters are nonetheless central to accountability, and so we should ask under what conditions they can best exercise this function. Third, voters are humans and as such are as prone to conflict as compromise and conciliation. We should consider, at a normative level, how electoral systems appeal to the best and worst of voters.

To begin, we must acknowledge that voters are far from the perfectly rational agents assumed in many models of politics.²⁷ Instead, they are most often uninformed about the details of politics and public policy.²⁸ They make up their public opinions off the top of their heads.²⁹ When they do engage in active reasoning about politics it is most often motivated and deeply biased. More often than not their policy preferences follow from their partisanship, not *vice versa*.³⁰ Less formally, they are seemingly no more capable of always making good choices than they are resisting the worst of hucksters and conmen.

²⁴ Golder and Ferland provides a particularly strong and comprehensive review.

²⁵ Powell Jr, G. Bingham, and Georg S. Vanberg. "Election laws, disproportionality and median correspondence: Implications for two visions of democracy." *British Journal of Political Science* 30, no. 03 (2000): 383-411; Lijphart, Arend. *Patterns of democracy: Government forms and performance in thirty-six countries*. Yale University Press, 2012; Budge, Ian, and Michael D. McDonald. "Election and party system effects on policy representation: Bringing time into a comparative perspective." *Electoral Studies* 26, no. 1 (2007): 168-179.

²⁶ Blais, André, and Marc André Bodet. "Does proportional representation foster closer congruence between citizens and policy makers?." *Comparative Political Studies* 39, no. 10 (2006): 1243-1262; Golder, Matt, and Jacek Stramski. "Ideological congruence and electoral institutions." *American Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 1 (2010): 90-106.

²⁷ Downs, Anthony. "An economic theory of political action in a democracy." *The journal of political economy* (1957): 135-150.

²⁸ Lupia, Arthur. *Uninformed: Why people seem to know so little about politics and what we can do about it*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

²⁹ Zaller, John. *The nature and origins of mass opinion*. Cambridge university press, 1992.

³⁰ Lenz, Gabriel S. *Follow the leader?: how voters respond to politicians' policies and performance*. University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Perhaps our only hope then is that voters might serve as agents of accountability. Whatever we think about the capacity of voters to reason over policy and to vote in an enlightened fashion, we have to at least believe that they have the capacity to throw out leaders whose policies and performance they do not approve. Absent this belief, what exactly is the justification for democratic selection of leaders and parties?

In general, the evidence here is not inspiring. As Achen and Bartels painstakingly demonstrate, voters are not good at assigning blame and credit.³¹ Nonetheless, we do not have an apparently better method than elections for enacting the peaceful removal of leaders. Is this better or worse in a proportional system? The most relevant evidence here likely comes from recent work by Raymond Duch and colleagues, using both observational work³² and work in laboratory experiments.³³ They take seriously the cognitive limits of voters. Their work suggests that accountability – which we can understand to be correctly identifying and punishing those responsible for policy failure – is best in systems where there is a clarity of responsibility. These conditions best obtain when voters have to consider the actions of a single party, rather than a coalition made up of several, each of whom may try to escape blame.

Finally, we must acknowledge some hard truths about humans. As Niebuhr put it: “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man’s inclination to injustice makes it necessary.”³⁴ Voters are not all bad, of course, but neither are they all good. In particular, as individuals whose identities are largely group-based, they are as inclined to seek differences with other groups as they are to look for similarities.³⁵ This is as true in politics as other domains.³⁶ Moreover, at least some individuals take pleasure in the ruination of others, whether that destruction is material, spiritual, or political. Given this, what exactly should we hope for from political parties? Two broad possibilities exist. First, a small number of parties who take as their *raison d’être* the incorporation and downplaying of differences. Second, a large number of parties seeking to articulate sharply the differences between groups of citizens, even when those differences were previously unknown or unimportant to those voters. In the extreme, such articulations are not an appeal to a capacity for justice. If proportional systems do not have an advantage on matters of representation and if they do not have an advantage in accountability,

³¹ Achen, Christopher H., and Larry M. Bartels. *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton University Press, 2016.

³² Duch, R.M. and Stevenson, R.T., 2008. *The economic vote: How political and economic institutions condition election results*. Cambridge University Press.

³³ Duch, Raymond, Wojtek Przepiorka, and Randolph Stevenson. "Responsibility attribution for collective decision makers." *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 2 (2015): 372-389.

³⁴ Niebuhr, R., 1972. *The children of light and the children of darkness*. Charles Scribner's Sons.

³⁵ University of Oklahoma. Institute of Group Relations, and Muzafer Sherif. *Intergroup conflict and cooperation: The Robbers Cave experiment*. Vol. 10. Norman, OK: University Book Exchange, 1961; Tajfel, Henri. *Social identity and intergroup relations*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

³⁶ Loewen, P.J., 2010. Affinity, antipathy and political participation: How our concern for others makes us vote. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 43(03), pp.661-687; Achen and Bartels 2016.

what exactly is their appeal? Hopefully proponents do not see virtue in the politicization of small differences.

Conclusion

That Canada's electoral system is not perfect is self-evident. It often exaggerates the power of the largest party. It occasionally elects governments which quickly prove to be unpopular. It is occasionally an object of great discontent. But this is no basis for reform, because no other system is perfect. If we wish to assess our electoral system against some alternative, I argue that there are three reasonable and simple conditions. First, is the existing system as or more likely to ensure the continued democratic selection of rulers as any proposed alternative. On this measure, our existing system performs well. Moreover, we should accept that there is substantial uncertainty involved in the effect of shifting to a whole new system, particularly on all the other institutions and practices that have slowly evolved alongside our electoral system. Second, does the existing system represent voters' preferences as well as an alternative system? Once we consider the various stages involved in converting preferences to policy, the answer seems to be yes. Third, which system is better suited to a realistic understanding of voters, not least in their ability to hold governments to account? And, in light of their tendencies towards fragmentation and division. Again, our existing system scores respectably. We ought not change.