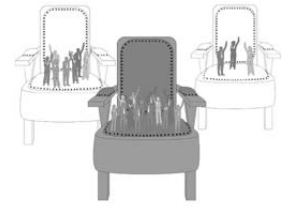


# FIRST-PAST-THE-POST HAS GOT TO GO



Chris Bradshaw

*Small parties often whine about the unfairness of the electoral system. In fact, it is unfair to them, but it's also bad for the system as a whole. It gives rise to strategic behaviour, both by the political parties, inside and outside of Parliament, and by voters themselves. Votes cast for strategic reasons obscure voters' true preferences and therefore hinder genuine democratic expression. The political parties implicitly endorse this view by using serial ballots to elect their leaders and candidates. Many substitute systems are possible, but first-past-the-post has got to go.*

*Les petits partis déplorent souvent le caractère injuste de notre système électoral. Or, cette injustice qui les touche est tout aussi néfaste à l'ensemble du système. Elle favorise les comportements stratégiques au sein des partis, qu'ils siègent ou non au Parlement, mais aussi parmi les électeurs. Les suffrages exprimés pour des raisons stratégiques masquent ainsi les véritables préférences des citoyens et ternissent l'exercice de la démocratie. Les partis soutiennent implicitement cette pratique en utilisant des bulletins en série pour élire leurs leaders et candidats. Il existe plusieurs systèmes de rechange au scrutin majoritaire à un tour, dont il nous faut absolument se défaire.*

Small parties can too easily be seen as whiners, collectives of people with poor platforms and weak candidates who are all too ready to blame “the system.” And by resorting to the courts, as my party, the Green Party, has recently done, we are seen as running to our mother's apron strings any time things don't go our way. We do so, however, because we know that we play an important role in the body politic by providing new political options and expanding voter choices, both of which attract more voters and allow for Parliament to address the problems that face the people comprehensively and in a timely manner.

As you have heard at this conference, the single-member plurality, or first-past-the-post (or as I nickname it, “FOP-TOP”), has two problems: candidates can win a seat with less than a majority, and parties can win a majority of seats with less than a majority of votes. The total of seats won by parties with more than 40 per cent of the popular vote usually exceeds 50 per cent, and as many as 95 per cent of seats go to parties with only 60 per cent of the vote. National parties with less than 40 per cent of the vote receive far fewer seats than their popular vote earned them while those with fewer than five per cent usually get no representation at all. These two failings of our system combine to discourage citizens from supporting the smaller parties, which ensures that such parties never get even the votes they earned, thus condemning them never to break through what amounts to a systemic, self-perpetuating cycle.

This voting system doesn't just hurt small parties, it hurts big ones, too. The large-party bias of FOP-TOP means that the parties favoured by the system win a mandate larger than they earned, thanks to a voter base diluted by “insincere” votes from those practicing “strategic voting.” The winner gets power, but not a clear mandate for what it should do with that power.

The Green Party is a young party that has very successful slightly older siblings around the world, the most successful being the Green Party of Germany, whose leader is foreign minister in that country's coalition government. In 2000, we were the fifth largest party (out of 11) in candidates, and the sixth most successful in votes garnered, getting almost as many as the other five non-Parliamentary parties combined, enough to elect three MPs under pure proportional representation, even though we ran candidates in only a third of the country's 301 ridings.

When we formed in the early 1980s, we used the slogan “the politics of ecology.” In what follows, I want to explore “the ecology of politics”—four ecological principles that I feel the present system is ignoring. My main contention is that FOP-TOP is so poor at reflecting the political will of citizens, parties and even Parliament, that all three must shift to “strategic” forms of behaviour to make up for the system's shortcomings. These strategies are:

- *Strategic voting.* Democracy requires that citizens use their vote to honour the candidate they deem to have

the best qualifications and platform. We don't allow candidates to buy people's votes, but FOP-TOP allows candidates of the larger parties to discourage citizens from voting their small-party first choice on the grounds that a vote for a candidate who is almost certain to lose will have no more impact than if they had not voted at all (an argument that is at least partly disingenuous since large parties very carefully note the size of the vote for the smaller parties and often adjust their policies accordingly). Every insincere vote is a blank cheque issued to a winner, or a false form of encouragement for a high-ranking loser. It is not a politically sustainable practice, for the voter or for our democracy.

- *Strategic politicking.* The parties, in noting FOP-TOP's propensity for "wasting" the votes it receives in ridings it does not win, become more strategic themselves. Their funds and parachuted candidates are allocated according to expected election results in the ridings. Safe seats are allocated to "stars," who make the party look more qualified to govern and who its leader wants in Cabinet. "Swing" seats are given more than their share of funds. And the rest of the ridings are written off, with the nomination going to a faithful supporter who, uncomplaining, will hope for an electoral miracle or perhaps a patronage "thank you" later. Because media markets are regional, resources are often directed to several adjacent seats, a reality that encourages new parties to limit their geographic appeal, rather than try to develop sensitivity to their platform across the country. Unfortunately, regional parties often base their campaigns on anti-government or anti-federal appeals, part of a growing "politics of resentment."

- *The strategic Parliament.* At the most senior levels, this strategic thinking causes Parliament itself to be less than it could be. The governing party will have more seats than its share of the popular vote earned it. That party will also have very thin representation from certain regions, which means that in order to provide the government with a national look it will have to give Cabinet posts to less capable MPs. But it won't give these ministers senior portfolios, even if these are the ones from which their supporters back home may most need help.

Under FOP-TOP a government is less likely to need help from other parties, which places them in the role of outsiders, or attack dogs, limited to fault-finding rather than constructive criticism. Of course, both parties, the government and the opposition, require strong party discipline, which comes easily when so many successful candidates

benefit from funding distributed strategically by the national party. And there are other perks that keep backbenchers in line, including parliamentary secretaryships, committee chairships and an easy ride to nomination at the following election.

- *Strategic citizen participation.* FOP-TOP also has negative impacts on voters' decision to participate in the democratic process. Studies have shown that voter turnout is highest where voter choice is highest, in the sense that the ballot provides voters an opportunity to have the greatest impact and the broadest choices. Why would someone feel good about turning up on voting day to choose between voting for a small party that has almost no chance of electing any of its candidates or making a "strategic" choice between the lesser of two (or three or four) evils? And, if the choices are narrow or the results not much in doubt, why follow the media or read the candidates' literature or websites? Finally, if Parliament is so top-down, with the party strategists controlling so much, why even try to make contact with your MP over an important issue of the day? What power does he or she have to do something about it?

Voters are also consumers, and will naturally compare their political-choice environment with the marketplace in which they meet their needs for goods and services. As consumers, would Canadians like being told that they can buy only one item in the store or that there is only one size of each kind of good? Or that some of the things they choose will not be provided, depending on the choices other shoppers make? They surely would not. So why should we expect them to accept such restrictions in their choice of political representatives?

If FOP-TOP is so satisfactory, why does no Canadian party use it to elect its leaders or candidates? The parties use serial ballots for a simple reason: they ensure that the winner has a clear majority. The thinking obviously is that the integrity of the party would be hurt by having a choice that was not supported by at least half the participating members. The leader or candidate could never overcome the sour grapes of losers and their supporters. The serial ballot also encourages more candidates, which of course ultimately means more losing candidates. But because losers' supporters find the ballot process fair they are more willing to work for the eventual nominee, regardless of their first initial choice. That increases the number of people drawn to the party rank-and-file. Although serial ballots are rarely used in elections, many countries replicate them with preferential voting (the alternative ballot).

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Let me end by offering, not altogether seriously, a couple of electoral reform alternatives that do not require meddling with ballots:

The first I call "Parliament, Inc." Under this system, votes in Parliament would not be one-member-one-vote, but instead each party would be awarded "proxies" for all the votes they received across all ridings, and would divide them equally among their members. In today's Parliament, Progressive Conservative members would have the most proxies each. This proxy system would ensure that parties would not overdevelop their ties with one region, since their MP's influence would depend on votes from ridings his party lost as well.

The second I call the "NPL", or "National Parliamentary League." I worked for 25 years in public participation in municipal planning. I saw how planners and engineers cynically viewed low participation as a tacit endorsement of their policies. In fact, it often reflected the lack of public interest, the poor way the proposals were communicated, or the low level of citizens' political efficacy. In contrast, the NPL, like sports leagues, would use various mechanisms to strengthen weaker parties and candidates, to accentuate the differences in platforms, and to provide voters with more information about the candidates. This would bring out more people, just as the level playing field between teams in a league ensures exciting matches. But rather than mandate


the specific measures, I would simply make the winner's salary and budget equal to the percentage of voters who actually showed up (with those who spoiled their ballot counting for, say, half a vote). This is not needed in sports, since the dollars that go to owners and players are only partially dependent on their win-loss records.

Our party and other small parties attract additional people into the system. We also come up with ideas for public problems that other parties would not have thought of or do not think workable unless forced to consider them carefully. We also raise issues that larger parties ignore (perhaps because of the scale of corporate giving to all major parties). For Parliament to be all it can be, voters have to feel they are free to vote as sincerely as the secret ballot and rules against buying votes were supposed to ensure. And parties have to know that they will not get a mandate they didn't earn. We could do these things so much better if we had a more level playing field, and all participants knew each vote was equally important.

FOP-TOP has to go!

*Chris Bradshaw has a B.A. in government and worked until early retirement as a municipal community relations specialist in planning. He now co-owns and -manages Virtucar, the Ottawa car-sharing organization, continues advocating for walking, and does consulting.*

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