

by Kent Weaver

# A HYBRID ELECTORAL SYSTEM FOR CANADA

*Dans un système électoral mixte qui serait axé sur les caractéristiques propres du Canada, on pourrait conjuguer l'importance accordée à la représentativité dans les régimes proportionnels avec la stabilité qu'offrent les régimes parlementaires à la Westminster, fondés sur le gouvernement majoritaire. L'auteur suggère qu'on augmente de 10% le nombre de sièges à la Chambre de communes et que ces nouveaux sièges soient répartis entre les provinces suivant leur importance démographique.*

Canada's plurality electoral system for the House of Commons has sparked a variety of complaints. Some of these criticisms are raised after almost every election, while other effects of the electoral system are more episodic, but can have very severe consequences when they do occur. The electoral system almost always punishes relatively small parties with widely diffused support (the New Democratic Party, and the Progressive Conservatives since 1993), and underrepresents women, aboriginals and visible minorities in the House. Canada's electoral system frequently causes governing parties to be shut out almost entirely from regions where they fail to win district pluralities, exacerbating a sense of regional grievance and exclusion from power (most notably the weakness of the Liberals in the West

under Trudeau). In six out of the last 14 general elections (most recently in 1979), it has failed to produce a single-party majority government. Somewhat less frequently, regionally oriented and regionally concentrated parties have received a higher share of seats than they won of the popular vote; in 1993, for example, the Bloc Québécois won 18.3 percent of the seats in the House with only 13.5 percent of the popular vote. In a few recent elections, party support has been so fragmented that a single region or province dominates the governing party caucus: this occurred most recently and dramatically in 1997, with more than 65 percent of the Liberal caucus elected from Ontario.

It is not difficult to devise electoral reform proposals that address at least some of these perceived failings of the plurality electoral system. It is very difficult, however, to address some of them without exacerbating others: most notably, an electoral system that converts votes into seats equitably across parties would make single-party majority governments almost impossible. It is even more difficult to devise an electoral reform proposal that could pass three major political hurdles to adoption: 1) the resistance of most Canadian politicians (especially those in the governing party) to any reform that lowers the probability that they will win a single-party majority government; 2) politicians' fear of exacerbating regional tensions by appearing to advantage one region over another; and 3) public hostility toward politicians which makes a substantial increase in the size of the House politically unacceptable.

Most of the "off-the-shelf" electoral reform proposals employed in other countries run seriously afoul of one or more of these political tests. Both pure proportional representation and the Mixed Member Proportional systems used in Germany and New Zealand are so efficient in distributing seats away from the largest parties that they make single-party majority governments almost impossible, even with significant minimum thresholds to keep out very small parties. The result would be perpetual minority or coalition governments. A French-style two ballot system would probably push the Reform and Conservative parties into second-round electoral alliances that would heighten ideological divisions in Canada and would weaken the prospects that the Liberal Party would win single-party majorities — hardly great selling points to the current governing party.

Given the tradeoff between single-party majority government and representational equity for political parties — and the political sensitivity of the former for politicians in power — the most practical objective for electoral reform is to lessen inequitable treatment of voters and parties rather than eliminating them entirely. A hybrid electoral system specifically tailored to Canadian conditions can successfully marry the Westminster-style parliamentary system's concern for stable single-party majority government with the representational concerns of more proportional systems. Specifically, the federal government could institute a

reform that:

1) increases the number of seats in the House of Commons by 10 percent, with those seats distributed among the provinces according to population — each province receiving roughly 10 percent more seats than it does now;

2) gives priority in awarding compensation seats within each province to the party that finishes first in a nationwide vote until giving that party another compensation seat would take its provincial seat share over that of its provincial vote share, at which point it passes to the second party in national vote share, then the third largest, *etc.*;

3) fills compensation seats from party lists established before the election. Candidates on these party lists may, but need not, also be candidates in individual constituencies.

This system has a number of advantages. It is procedurally simple to implement and reasonably easy for voters to understand. And it ameliorates — although it does not eliminate — many of the ubiquitous and episodic problems associated with Canada's current electoral system. Particularly important is its capacity to lessen regional underrepresentation of the national governing party. Governing parties are unlikely to win any compensation seats in provinces where they are strong, because they will already have been overcompensated by the plurality electoral system in those provinces. But they do get the first crack at seats in regions where the plurality system has operated against them. In the 1997 election, for example, if this proposal had been in effect and voter behaviour remained unchanged, the Liberals would have picked up no additional seats in Ontario, but they would have won three additional seats in each of the provinces of Alberta, British Columbia and Quebec, and one in each of Nova Scotia and Saskatchewan, more accurately reflecting their level of voting support in those provinces and weakening perceptions within those regions that they were excluded from the governing party. This reform would also have lessened modestly the predominance of Ontario within the governing Liberal caucus (see table 1). Similarly, the Reform Party, which won close to 20 percent of the popular vote in Ontario, would have received 10 seats in that province and one in New Brunswick, more accurately reflecting its national voter base. During the Trudeau years, the Liberals would have dramatically increased their seats in the four western provinces and the Conservatives their seats in Quebec, with Quebec's dominance of the governing Liberal caucus slightly lessened because of

the Liberals' gain in compensation seats in other regions. Overall, this proposal would modestly improve the nationwide fairness of vote-to-seat conversions across parties, and it would dramatically improve that fairness within individual regions.

Equally important are the incentives that the proposed compensation seat system would create for political parties to change the types of appeals they make. There would be strong disincentives under such a system to make regional appeals that would attract votes in one region but repel them in others, because doing so would likely move a party downward in terms of its rank order in total national popular vote, and thus dramatically lower its prospects for winning some of the limited number of compensation seats in regions where it was relatively weak. The proposed compensation seat system would, in short, put a premium on broadening appeals beyond a specific region, as the Reform Party attempted to do in 1993, and weaken incentives to pursue strategies that alienate voters outside its core region, such as Reform's "tough on Quebec" stance in 1997. (A shift of only 28,000 votes throughout Canada from Reform to the Tories in 1997 would have moved the Conservatives to second place in the queue and given them Ontario's 10 compensation seats.) Parties like the Bloc Québécois that limit their appeal to a single province or region and are overcompensated by the current plurality electoral system would generally be less overcompensated by the electoral reform proposed

**SIMULATION OF THE 1997 ELECTION USING TEN PERCENT ADDITIONAL COMPENSATION SEATS AND "LARGEST NATIONAL PARTIES" ALLOCATION BIAS**

	Liberal		PC		NDP		Reform		Bloc Québécois	
	Consti- tuency	Compen- sation	Consti- tuency	Compen- sation	Consti- tuency	Compen- sation	Consti- tuency	Compen- sation	Consti- tuency	Compen- sation
Alberta	2	3	0	0	0	0	24	0	—	—
British Columbia	6	3	0	0	3	0	25	0	—	—
Manitoba	6	0	1	1	4	0	3	0	—	—
New Brunswick	3	0	5	0	2	0	0	1	—	—
Newfoundland	4	0	3	0	0	1	0	0	—	—
Nova Scotia	0	1	5	0	6	0	0	0	—	—
Ontario	101	0	1	0	0	0	0	10	—	—
PEI	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	—	—
Quebec	26	3	5	5	0	0	0	0	44	0
Saskatchewan	1	1	0	0	5	0	8	0	—	—
Yukon/ Northwest Terr.	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	—	—
<b>Total</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>0</b>
Constituency + Compensation	166		26		22		71		44	

Does not include one independent seat in Ontario.

here: they are unlikely to qualify for compensation seats in their home region because they are already overcompensated there, and they will not win compensation seats elsewhere, both because they are likely to be near the back of the queue for compensation seats based on their national vote totals and because their low vote share in provinces outside their home region sets a low ceiling on the number of seats that they can win in those areas.

Because this modest reform allows the leading party to win some compensation seats in regions where it is weak in most elections (except rare elections like 1984 where the winning party is strong in all regions), it only modestly lowers the prospects for single-party majority government. Over the past 10 elections, Liberal majorities in 1974 and 1997 would have been reduced to razor-thin margins, and the Liberal government of 1980 would have been left two seats short of a majority, but other results would have been the same.

The effect of this proposal on underrepresentation of women, aboriginals and visible minorities is most difficult to predict. Because the number of compensation seats is quite limited, the upward boundary on its capacity is quite limited. The ultimate impact would clearly depend on what formal rules and informal norms parties developed to ensure representation of these groups in higher positions on their party list. The safest prediction is that the proposed compensation seat system would result in a modest, but not insignificant, increase in representation of these groups.

The electoral reform proposed here also scores well on political acceptability. It does not create a systematic bias for one large party or another, or for smaller

parties against larger ones (or *vice versa*). It only very modestly increases the prospects for minority government. And it would have offsetting advantages for the governing party: by providing more MPs for the governing party in regions where it is relatively weak, it would make politicians' task of forming a regionally balanced cabinet easier. And by weakening regional underrepresentation in the larger parties, it might make those parties less susceptible to attack — and even to being supplanted as one of the two most plausible contenders for pluralities in constituency seats — by parties with a region-specific appeal in regions where they are weak. This proposal also has procedural advantages: because it adheres closely to the constitutional principle of provincial representation in the House of Commons proportionate to population, it should be adoptable by simple action of the federal Parliament, rather than triggering the seven-provinces-with-fifty-percent-of-the-population or unanimity amending formulas for constitutional amendments.

Nor does this reform proposal advantage any region of Canada over another — indeed its most consistent and important effect is to ensure that no region of Canada is excluded from the governing party. It is also consistent with public objections to significant increases in the size

of the House of Commons. As proposed here, the House would be increased in size by only 10 percent. The proposal could easily be modified to prevent any increase at all by simply reducing the number of constituency seats slightly. This option would, however, require greater alteration of existing constituency boundaries, increasing opposition from affected legislators who fear losing their seats in a redistribution.

The political costs to risk-averse politicians of adopting such a reform could be lowered even further by writing "sunset" provisions into the electoral law: it will be tried for one or two elections after which the old pure plurality system will return unless Parliament votes otherwise. Once it was in place, however, I am confident that politicians would realize that the benefits of reform dramatically outweigh its costs.

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### CHANGES IN PARTY REPRESENTATION USING TEN PER CENT ADDITIONAL COMPENSATION SEATS WITH "LARGEST NATIONAL PARTIES" BIAS

Year	(1) Liberals in 4 Western Provinces		(2) Minority Party in Quebec <sup>c</sup>		(3) Governing Party Canada-wide		(4) Most Heavily Represented Region Share Of Governing Party Caucus	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
1965								
Actual seat share	8/70	11.4	8/75	10.7	131/265	49.4	56/131	42.7 (Q)
Simulation seat share	13/77	16.9	16/83	19.3	137/292	46.9	56/137	40.9 (Q)
Vote share		27.0		21.2		40.2		30.0
1968								
Actual seat share	27/68	39.7	4/74	5.4	155/264	58.7	64/155	41.3 (O)
Simulation seat share	31/74	41.9	11/81	13.6	161/289	55.7	64/161	39.8 (O)
Vote share		37.4		21.4		45.5		37.1
1972								
Actual seat share	7/68	10.3	2/74	2.7	109/264	41.3	56/109	51.4 (Q)
Simulation seat share	13/74	17.6	9/81	11.1	118/289	40.8	56/118	47.5 (Q)
Vote share		27.5		17.4		38.5		34.7
1974								
Actual seat share	13/68	19.1	3/74	4.1	141/264	53.4	60/141	42.6(Q)
Simulation seat share	17/74	23.0	10/81	12.3	146/289	50.5	60/146	41.1(Q)
Vote share		29.6		21.2		43.2		32.4
1979								
Actual seat share	3/77	3.9	2/75	2.7	136/282	48.2	57/136	41.9 (W&O)
Simulation seat share	10/84	11.9	10/83	12.0	144/310	46.5	57/144	39.6 (W&O)
Vote share		22.6		13.5		35.9		
36.8(W)/42.1(O)								
1980								
Actual seat share	2/77	2.6	1/75	1.3	147/282	52.1	74/147	50.3(Q)
Simulation seat share	9/84	10.7	9/83	10.8	154/310	49.7	74/154	48.1(Q)
Vote share		23.4		12.6		44.3		41.6
1984								
Actual seat share	2/77	2.6	17/75	22.7	211/282	74.8	67/211	31.8(O)
Simulation seat share	9/84	10.7	25/83	30.1	212/310	68.4	67/212	31.6(O)
Vote share		16.4		35.4		50.0		33.7
1988								
Actual seat share	6/86	7.0	12/75	16.0	169/295	57.3	63/169	37.3(O)
Simulation seat share	13/94	13.8	20/83	24.1	170/324	52.5	63/170	37.1(O)
Vote share		20.7		30.3		43.0		31.6
1993								
Actual seat share	27/86	31.4	19/75	25.3	177/295	60.0	98/177	55.4 (O)
Simulation seat share	33/94	35.1	27/83	32.5	191/324	59.0	98/191	51.3 (O)
Vote share		30.0		33.0		41.3		13.5 <sup>a</sup> 18.7 <sup>b</sup> 45.7
1997								
Actual Seat share	15/88	17.0	26/75	34.7	155/301	51.5	6101/155	65.2 (O)
Simulation seat share	22/96	22.9	29/83	34.9	156/330	50.3	7101/166	60.8 (O)
Vote share		27.3		36.1		37.8		45.7

a Progressive Conservatives through 1980; Liberals in 1984, 1988 and 1993.

b Bloc Québécois is opposition party in actual vote.

c Reform Party is opposition party in simulation.

Note: Vote shares shown in this table are shares of total valid votes cast. In column 6, W=West (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan