



Fair Vote Canada **Représentation équitable au Canada**

Why Proportional Representation?

A look at the evidence

This paper summarizes results from comparative research comparing the performance of the two main families of voting systems: winner-take-all and proportional representation (PR). We already know that PR is a way of ensuring that all votes count and delivering more representative election results. The research cited below goes further by demonstrating the impact of PR on the policy choices made by governments. This research shows that PR outperforms winner-take-all systems on measures of democracy, quality of life, income equality, environmental performance, and fiscal policy.

Two Families of Voting Systems

There are two basic types, or families, of voting systems:

1) **Winner-take-all.** Political scientists call these systems "majoritarian". Winner-take-all systems include among others the First Past the Post and Alternative Vote systems. These systems use single member ridings and yield a winning representative elected by the largest group of voters in each riding. Winner-take-all systems tend to produce single-party majority governments in which one party normally wins more than half the seats, obtaining a virtual monopoly of decision making power. In many cases, such majorities rest on less than 50% of the popular vote.

All winner-take-all systems share the same basic flaws: a high percentage of wasted votes, distorted results in which the seats earned do not reflect the popular vote, suppression of minority viewpoints, adversarial politics, and legislatures which do not accurately reflect the diversity of the country.

2) **Proportional Representation.** PR systems include the sort of Party-list systems common in other parts of the world, but also Mixed Member Proportional and Single Transferable Vote systems, with country-specific variations of each. PR systems are based on the principle that the number of seats a party earns in a legislature should closely match the percentage of votes obtained by that party. PR tends to produce legislatures which better reflect the full range of citizens' views, including ethnic and gender diversity. Because a single party rarely earns more

than 50% of the vote, two or more parties usually govern together in a coalition representing a majority of voters.

Comparing Winner-Take-All to Proportional Systems

Substantial comparative research has been conducted on the impact of winner-take-all systems vs proportional systems on a range of different topics. The following summarizes the main results of that research. It covers a wide range of indicators, as one might expect, because theoretical considerations lead us to expect that the choice of electoral systems has wide-ranging implications on how citizens relate to their governments and how government policies are considered and implemented.

Among the reasons to expect a proportional system to have an impact are the following:

- PR gives equal value to every vote and for this reason is likely to lead to increased government accountability to citizens and greater voter satisfaction. Some of the impacts of this can be seen below in the section titled “Measures of Democracy.”
- A feature of winner-take-all systems is that small shifts in electoral preferences can have inflated repercussions on the number of seats a party wins and its ability to form the government. This creates political instability and the phenomenon of “policy lurch” when one majority government is defeated by another at the other end of the political spectrum. It encourages political parties to jockey for short-term advantage rather than focusing on long-term policy issues. The elimination of these tendencies under PR would be expected to come with increased attention to the long-view and a greater policy coherence over time.
- By making every vote count and allowing for a wider range of views to be represented in the legislature, PR empowers ordinary citizens. This can be expected to have an impact on inequality and access to social services over time and could condition how a country deals with diversity more generally. This point provides the central argument in a recent book by Salomon Orellana (2014). He argues that increased opportunities for diversity and dissent allows PR countries to outperform in four areas:
 - policy innovation
 - mitigating the pandering of politicians in the pursuit of voters by promising quick-fix solutions
 - increasing the political sophistication of the electorate
 - limiting elite control over decision making.

Measures of Democracy

Arend Lijphart (1999 and 2012), a world-renowned political scientist, spent his career studying various features of democratic life in majoritarian and "consensual" (PR) democracies. In his landmark study titled *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in 36 Countries*, he compared 36 democracies over 55 years,

Using World Governance Indicators and Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, Lijphart (2012) found that PR countries outperformed majoritarian ones on 16 out of 17 measures of sound government and decision making - nine of them at a statistically significant level - including government effectiveness (quality and independence of the public service, quality of policy making), rule of law, and the level and control of corruption (including capture of the state by elite interests).

Looking at a number of specific indicators, Lijphart found that in countries using proportional systems,

- Voter turnout was higher by 7.5 percentage points, when contextual factors are taken into account.
- Government policies were closer to the view of the median voter.
- Citizens were more satisfied with the performance of their countries' democratic institutions, even when the party they voted for was not in power.
- There was a small increase in the number of parties in Parliament.
- The share of women elected to legislators was 8 percentage points higher.
- Scores were higher on measures of political participation and civil liberties

Lijphart's general conclusion is that consensual (PR) democracies are "kinder, gentler democracies" (2012: 293).

Research by other authors has yielded similar results. Lijphart's finding that proportional systems lead to governments that better reflect the views of the median voter was confirmed by McDonald, Mendes and Budge (2004), who looked at 254 elections producing 471 governments in 20 countries.

Pilon (2007: 154-155) is relatively cautious about the impact of PR on voter turnout, noting that the observed impact varies from study to study and is affected by other considerations than the choice of electoral system, but ends up supporting Lijphart's conclusion, describing the "typical bonus" of voter turnout under PR to be in the order of 7 to 8 percentage points.

Stability and Ability to Take a Long-term Policy Perspective

One of the biggest debates about PR is whether it leads to political instability. This is a multi-faceted subject, because instability has many faces and focusing on the examples of individual countries does not get us very far. The subject is addressed by Pilon (2007: 146-154), who finds the arguments and evidence against PR unconvincing in this regard. He discusses the frequently-cited cases of Italy and Israel in particular, and finds the usual analysis both inaccurate and of limited interest to countries facing different political situations. In his view, the experience of stable countries like Germany and New Zealand would be more relevant in assessing the potential impact of PR in Canada, and neither country has faced the sorts of problems encountered by Italy and Israel.

Comparative research on the subject, which shows little difference in matters of political stability between PR and first-past-the-post countries. Using the number of elections between 1945 and 1998 as an indicator, Pilon calculates that countries using First Past the Post averaged 16.7 elections, while countries using proportional systems averaged only 16.0 elections (Pilon, 2007). The difference between these two groups of countries is thus very slight. He points to other data that shows a somewhat shorter government life-span in PR countries (1.8 years as opposed to 2.5 years in first-past-the-post countries), but discounts this result because it is heavily influenced by the Italian experience (48 governments in 46 years) mainly involving what would elsewhere only be considered as cabinet shuffles (p. 147). He concludes that instability is “not a problem for PR systems in western countries” (p. 151).

Not addressed by comparative research to date is the problem of “policy lurch” as countries shift from one majority government to another or the tendency to focus on short-term issues at the expense of long-term stability in first-past-the-post political systems. The following subsections suggest that PR systems are better equipped to deal with long term issues such as sound fiscal management, economic growth and environmental management.

Economic Performance and Fiscal Responsibility

Commenting on the economic performance of countries using different systems, Carey and Hix (2009) found that countries with moderately proportional systems were more fiscally responsible and more likely to enjoy fiscal surpluses. Orellana (2014) found that proportional systems tend to have higher surpluses or lower deficits than less proportional systems and lower levels of national debt. Orellana’s regression analysis predicts a surplus of 0.05 percent of GDP for fully proportional countries, against a deficit of 2.9 percent of GDP in majoritarian countries. The predicted national debt is 65.7 percent higher in majoritarian countries compared to those with fully proportional systems, meaning the cost of servicing the debt will be higher.

Turning to the issue of economic performance more generally, the correlation seems to depend upon the sample being used. Lijphart (2012) and Orellana (2014) found no relationship between electoral systems and economic growth. However, when Knutsen (2011) looked at a much longer historical period involving 3,710 country-years of data covering 107 countries from 1820 to 2002, he found that proportional and semi-proportional systems produced an “astonishingly robust” and “quite substantial” increase in economic growth - a one percentage point increase - compared to plurality-majoritarian systems. He suggests this may be because of the tendency for PR to promote broad-interest policies rather than special interest policies; and because PR systems produce more stable and thus more credible economic policies. He concludes that PR and semi-PR systems generate more prosperity than plural-majoritarian systems.

Environmental Stewardship

Frederiksson (2004) found that countries using proportional systems set stricter environmental policies. Darcie Cohen (2010) found that countries with proportional systems were faster to ratify the Kyoto protocol and their share of world total carbon emissions had declined.

Looking at environmental performance, Lijphart (2012) and Orellana (2014) found that countries with proportional systems scored six points higher on the Yale Environmental Performance Index, which measures ten policy areas, including environmental health, air quality, resource management, biodiversity and habitat, forestry, fisheries, agriculture and climate change.

Using data from the International Energy Agency, Orellana (2014) found that between 1990 and 2007, when carbon emissions were rising everywhere, the statistically predicted increase was significantly lower in countries with fully proportional systems, at 9.5%, compared to 45.5% in countries using winner-take-all systems.

Orellana (2014) found that citizens in countries with proportional representation were more supportive of environmental action, more willing to pay the costs associated with environmental protection. He found the use of renewable energy to be approximately 117 percent higher in countries with fully proportional electoral systems.

In sum, countries with proportional systems tend to act more quickly and do more to protect the environment.

Social Policy

As noted earlier, PR tends to empower ordinary citizens and one might expect that to be reflected in indicators of income inequality and of social policy outcomes. This expectation is borne out by the research.

Income Inequality

Lijphart (2012: 282) found that countries with proportional systems had considerably lower levels of income inequality. Likewise, Birchfield and Crepaz (1998) found that “consensual political institutions (which use PR) tend to reduce income inequalities whereas majoritarian institutions have the *opposite* effect” (p. 192). The results of the regression work they present were highly significant, with PR accounting for 51% of the variance in income inequality among countries.

The authors explain this result in terms of the higher degree of political power of people in PR Systems. In their words:

“The more widespread the access to political institutions, and the more representative the political system, the more citizens will take part in the political process to change it in their favour which will manifest itself, among other things, in lower income inequality. Such consensual political institutions make the government more responsive to the demands of a wider range of citizens” (p. 191).

Vincenzo Verardi, in a 2005 study of 28 democracies, also found that when the degree of proportionality of a system increases, inequality decreases. Proportional representation is associated with greater efforts to promote income redistribution (Iversen & Soskice 2006).

Human Development

Investigating the broader impact of PR on society, Carey and Hix (2009) looked at 610 elections over 60 years in 81 countries and found that PR countries garnered higher scores on the United Nations Index of Human Development, which incorporates health, education and standard of living indicators. Carey and Hix consider that the Index of Human Development provides “a reasonable overall indicator of government performance in the delivery of public goods and human welfare.” Lijphart found that countries with PR spent an average of 4.75% more on social expenditures than majoritarian democracies.

Focusing on a health indicator that is of growing importance, Orellana (2014) demonstrates that the predicted obesity rate among adults is considerably lower in countries with fully proportional electoral systems, at 12%, compared to countries with majoritarian systems, where it is 26%.

Diversity and Social Cohesion

The impact of electoral systems on society can be extremely far-reaching because of the impact on how citizens and government interact and how citizens relate to each other. As we saw in the introduction, Arellana (2014) provides a number of reasons why the improved scope for diversity

of views in PR systems can have an impact. Below are some of the many implications that seem to derive from the adoption of more proportional electoral systems.

Prejudice, Tolerance and Changing Attitudes

Using data from the World Values Survey conducted between 1981 and 2010, he found that citizens in countries with proportional systems tend to show lower levels of prejudice towards minority and marginalized groups. Countries with majoritarian systems scored approximately 44 percent higher on the prejudice scale than countries with fully proportional electoral systems.

He found that citizens in countries with more proportional electoral systems tend to have higher levels of tolerance for homosexuality, abortion, divorce, euthanasia and prostitution; and a higher level of disagreement with the notion that men make better leaders.

Furthermore, their attitudes towards those issues tended to evolve more quickly than elsewhere. Over a roughly 25-year period, tolerance of homosexuality increased by 0.41 points in countries using proportional systems vs. 0.20 points in single member district systems.

Law Enforcement and Defence

Perhaps because PR mitigates pandering for votes based on quick fixes, Orellana (2014) and Lijphart (2012) have found that countries with less proportional systems tend to have more public support for punitive solutions to crime and produce more punitive policy outcomes including higher incarceration rates and greater use of capital punishment. Orellana (2014) found that support for incarceration is approximately 28 percentage points higher in countries with majoritarian systems. Confirming similar results by Lijphart (2012), he found that the statistically-predicted incarceration rate for a countries with fully proportional systems was 136 per 100,000 people compared to 246 in majoritarian countries.

Relying on an indicator of privacy and surveillance produced by Privacy International (2011) for over 30 countries, Orellana (2014) found that countries with proportional systems scored 58% higher on the privacy index.

Looking at the average military expenditure as a percentage of GDP between 1988 and 2012 and data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Orellana (2014) found that the predicted level of military spending for countries with majoritarian systems was more than twice as high as for countries with fully proportional systems (2.6% vs. 1.1% of GDP).

Leblang and Chan (2003) found that a country's electoral system is the most important predictor of a country's involvement in war, according to three different measures: (1) when a country was the first to enter a war; (2) when it joined a multinational coalition in an ongoing war; and (3) how

long it stayed in a war after becoming a party to it.

Lijphart (2012) found that proportional representation is strongly correlated with a lower degree of violent events, more political stability and a lower risk of internal conflict.

Is perfect proportionality needed to have an impact?

A question that may be asked is how perfectly proportional an electoral system has to be before its impact is felt. This is a relevant issue for a country such as Canada, which is considering options such as Mixed Member Proportional or other regionally-based options that are highly, but not fully proportional. The issue was the primary research question covered by Carey and Hix (2009 and 2011).

Their results show that moderately proportional systems involving multi-member districts of six to eight seats made it possible to avoid disproportional results to a degree almost matching that of more purely proportional systems (2011: Figure 3). They point to countries such as Costa Rica, Hungary, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain that have settled for a moderate degree of proportionality in the design of their electoral systems (2011: 384).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results from the existing body of comparative research are very clear: regarding the favorable impact of PR on countries that adopt such electoral systems. PR systematically outperforms winner-take-all systems on a wide range of measures, including:

- higher quality of democratic life itself
- prudent fiscal management
- higher economic growth
- better environmental management
- reduced income inequality
- higher levels of human development
- greater tolerance of diversity
- a less punitive approach to law enforcement
- greater respect for privacy
- lower levels of conflict and militarism.

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