Canadian Electoral Reform: A Modest Yet Effective Proposal

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Summary

A simple change in current procedures for electing members makes the House of Commons more representative of the popular vote.

Background

Members of the House of Commons are currently elected under the First Past the Post rule: the candidate with the most votes represents the riding. This often results in overrepresentation of a party when the proportion of seats held by the party is greater than the proportion of votes for that party nationally. Majority governments representing less than the majority of the voters precipitated current discussions and past referenda on electoral reform in British Columbia in 2005 and Ontario in 2007. Some believe that a more representative government would serve the country better.

The referenda in British Columbia and Ontario involved major changes to ridings and voting: Single Transferable Vote and Mixed Member Proportional, respectively. These were difficult for some to understand and both referenda failed. However, a more easily understood alternative to First Past the Post produces a more representative House of Commons.

Ranked ballots have often been used in Canada and elsewhere. They can identify the two candidates with the most votes. The remaining ballots with first preference for other candidates can be used to select the winner among the first two. Thus, the winning candidate is guaranteed support of a majority of the voters. However, the use of ranked ballots can also lead to overrepresentation of a party.

The proposed solution

The proposed simple procedure can only make the House of Commons more representative.

Under First Past the Post, most candidates are elected with large reliable pluralities. However, candidates who are elected with small, unreliable margins, unduly affect the representation of parties in the House. To prevent this unfortunate outcome, ranking of candidates in the ballots determines the elected candidates in those ridings where FPTP would lead to overrepresentation.

This change in a small number of ridings results in:

- the proportion of seats a party wins more closely matches the proportion of votes for that party;
- the voters in each riding know that they are represented by a member with large popular support;
- all sitting members of the governing party knows that they represent a riding for which they received large support; and
- the change is elementary and simply explained.

In most ridings, candidates are elected with reliable margins, and these candidates will still be elected. The proposed change applies only to ridings where the votes for candidates for an overrepresented party do not surpass those of a candidate from an underrepresented party by a reliable margin. In such ridings, both of the leading two candidates could just as well represent the riding. However, the election of second-place candidates leads to a House of Commons more representative of the national vote. If nothing is done, the candidates with small, unreliable pluralities will deprive an underrepresented party of seats in the House of Commons. In such ridings, if the candidate with the most first preferences does not win by a reliable margin of, say, 5%, the ranked ballots will be used to select from the top two.

This simple change will prevent candidates with an unreliable plurality from denying underrepresented parties seats in the House of Commons.

The rule, applied sequentially to ridings with the smallest pluralities, can only reduce the number of seats of an overrepresented party and hence can only make the House of Commons more representative.

The application of the rule is illustrated with the two most recent federal elections. There is no data on ranked ballots from these elections and so results are approximated by assigning the winner of the ranked ballots to the second place candidate.

Federal election 2011

In 2011, the Conservative Party won a majority of 54% of the seats in the House of Commons with 40% of the votes in the country. The NDP won 33% of the seats with 30% of the vote.

Many ridings are closely contested with the result that many members are elected by only very small margins. Table 1 illustrates the seat changes that result as the rule is applied sequentially by requiring the smallest margins expressed in terms of percentage of plurality.

Table 1. 2011 seat changes resulting from requiring an increasing margin expressed in terms of percentage of plurality.

Margin	CON	NDP	LIB	BQ	GN	Other
0.00	166	103	34	4	1	0

0.04	165	103	35	4	1	0
0.05	164	103	36	4	1	0
0.74	163	103	37	4	1	0
0.82	162	103	38	4	1	0
1.14	161	103	39	4	1	0
1.15	161	102	40	4	1	0
1.44	160	102	41	4	1	0
1.75	159	102	42	4	1	0
1.81	158	102	43	4	1	0
1.96	158	101	44	4	1	0
2.11	158	100	44	5	1	0
2.22	157	100	45	5	1	0
2.50	157	99	45	6	1	0
2.52	156	99	46	6	1	0
3.16	155	99	47	6	1	0
3.24	154	99	48	6	1	0
3.66	154	98	49	6	1	0
3.87	153	98	50	6	1	0
4.44	152	98	51	6	1	0

No change in the candidates or ridings is required. The only change is that, after all ballots are counted, in a few ridings the second-place candidate might be elected by the remaining ranked ballots. The elected candidate would have had almost the same number of first preference votes as the first-place candidate.

If all members of the House had to win by a reliable margin of 5% over an underrepresented party, then 14 seats would have moved from the Conservative to the Liberal party. Three seats would have moved from the NDP to the Liberals. Two seats would have moved from the NDP to the BQ.

The results for 2011 requiring a reliable margin of 5% plurality are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Results of Federal Election 2011 with the 5% plurality requirement.

Party	Vote%	First Past Post		Reliable Margin	
		Seats	Seat%	Seats	Seat%
CON	40	166	54	152	49
NDP	31	103	33	98	32
LIB	19	34	11	51	17
BQ	6	4	1	6	2
GREEN	4	1	0	1	0

OTHER	1	0	0	0	0

Federal Election 2015

In 2015, the Liberal party campaigned on a platform that included changing the way members of the House of Commons are elected. In that election, the Liberal Party won 54% of the seats with 39% of the vote. The Conservatives won 29% of the seats with 32% of the vote. The NDP won 13% of the seats with 20% of the vote. Tables 3 and 4 illustrate the seat changes that result as the rule is applied sequentially requiring the smallest margins expressed in terms of percentage of plurality.

Table 3. 2015 seat changes resulting from requiring an increasing margin expressed in terms of percentage of plurality.

Margin	LIB	CON	NDP	BQ	GN	OTHER
0.00	184	99	44	10	1	0
0.19	183	100	44	10	1	0
0.45	182	101	44	10	1	0
1.22	181	102	44	10	1	0
1.37	180	102	45	10	1	0
1.44	179	102	46	10	1	0
1.62	178	102	47	10	1	0
1.80	177	102	48	10	1	0
1.86	176	102	49	10	1	0
2.14	175	103	49	10	1	0
2.17	174	103	50	10	1	0
2.24	173	104	50	10	1	0
2.32	172	105	50	10	1	0
2.35	171	105	50	11	1	0
2.49	170	106	50	11	1	0
2.57	169	107	50	11	1	0
2.89	168	107	51	11	1	0
2.91	167	107	52	11	1	0
4.09	166	107	53	11	1	0
4.12	165	107	53	12	1	0
4.12	164	107	54	12	1	0
4.20	163	107	55	12	1	0

Table 4. Results of Federal Election 2015 with the 5% plurality requirement.

Party	Vote%	First Past Post		Reliable Margin	
		Seats	Seat%	Seats	Seat%
LIB	39	184	54	163	48

CON	32	99	29	107	32
NDP	20	44	13	55	16
BQ	5	10	3	12	4
GREEN	3	1	0	1	0
OTHER	1	0	0	0	0

Discussion

The simple change that requires members of an overrepresented party to win by a reliable margin over candidates from an underrepresented party results in a House of Commons more representative of the national vote. The effect of the change is to increase the voices of the opposition parties in parliamentary debates.

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