

The Need for Electoral Reform in Canada:

Solving the Issue of Strategic Voting with an Updated Voting System

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After the 2021 Canadian federal election, Fawcett (2021) found that “more than one-third of Canadians told Leger [political polling] they voted strategically in order to stop another party from winning” (p. 2). Strategic voting in Canada has become a larger issue than most citizens might believe. In terms of using strategy to vote for a certain candidate, “the only thing that matters in terms of voting is whether one’s vote affects which candidate wins in the district. This exclusive focus is why voters turn from preferred candidates to less valued ones if they are more likely to win” (Aldrich et al., 2018, p. 8). According to Aldrich et al., Canada’s current voting system, the first-past-the-post system, is extremely susceptible to strategic voting (p. 6).

The 2015 and 2019 federal elections proved to be the time for the New Democratic party (NDP) supporters to switch their support to the Liberal party, in order to prevent the Conservative party from being in power. Bryden (2019) notes that “of the respondents who ultimately voted Liberal, 46 per cent said they had considered voting for the NDP at some point during the campaign” (p. 14). Based on this evidence, I argue the current voting system in Canada, first-past-the-post, contributes to strategic voting and the federal and provincial governments must change the voting system. A single transferable voting system, as well as a mixed-member proportional system, will ultimately reduce the problem of strategic voting in Canada. Implementing these voting systems will reflect the popular vote better, fix the federal versus local issue within ridings and provide more diversity and representation in the House of

Commons. The following paper uses the work of Potter (2017), Aldrich et al. (2017), and Abramson et al. (2010), to first define issues with strategic voting, then diagnose potential solutions.

Literature Review

This literature review summarizes the scholarship surrounding three key themes throughout the paper. Firstly, the central theme of this argument is the need for electoral reform (Law Commission of Canada, 2004; Potter, 2017). Electoral reform has been studied extensively in Canada, as well as internationally. Political research and opinions on electoral reform became prevalent in Canada around 2001.

One pertinent example from this era is when the Law Commission of Canada conducted qualitative research on electoral reform opinions in Canada and eventually proposed a complete reform of Canada's electoral system (Law Commission of Canada, 2004, p. xiii). This extensive proposal critiques the first-past-the-post system provides requirements for reviewing new electoral systems and finally proposes different options for reform and how this process may look. Although this proposal was ultimately rejected by the Government of Canada, many political scholars began researching and discussing the idea of electoral reform for Canada after the publication of the proposal.

Since 2015 there has been discussion and debate on if electoral reform would benefit the Canadian political system. There is an array of unbiased research that analyzes the advantages and disadvantages of first-past-the-post and electoral reform options. For example, a 2017 book titled *Should We Change How We Vote? Evaluating Canada's Electoral System* provides a collection of papers published by political scholars that discuss Canada's current system and suggest ways for reform (Potter, 2017). The book evaluates the current electoral system and

includes multiple articles against, and for electoral reform in Canada under the current political climate.

The second theme important to review for this paper is the issue of strategic voting in Canada. Aldrich et al. (2018) provides “a conceptual framework for thinking about voting and its strategic and sincere forms” (p. 4). This chapter gives context to the history of strategic voting, when strategic voting occurs and most importantly why it occurs (pp. 4-5). Additionally, Abramson et al. (2010) similarly define strategic voting by differentiating a strategic vote from a “sincere vote” (p. 65). In order to solve the issue of strategic voting through electoral reform, it is important to understand what strategic voting is and why it exists in Canada.

Abramson et al. define strategic voting as considering the outcome of the election rather than the individual’s favoured party (p. 65). Citizens use this strategy when they believe their individual voting opinions do not matter or count in the election. For example, climate activists typically align their values with the Green Party of Canada; however, they may hesitate to vote for them as they have a low chance of winning seats. Similarly, Warren (2017) reflects on several issues that come with strategic voting. For instance, Warren argues that the Canadian federal government may have authority, but they lack the validity needed from Canadian citizens to make respectable decisions due to strategic voting in the first-past-the-post system (p. 88).

The third and final theme under review is the two voting systems proposed in this paper. First, the single transferable voting system is a type of ranked ballot system currently used in Ireland, Malta and the Australian Senate (Law Commission of Canada, 2004, p. 80). The Law Commission of Canada discusses some of the advantages of this system: proportionality, fairness, greater voter choice, and minimizing party influence.

Under a strategic voting lens, Bartholdi and Orlin (1991) examine exactly how the single transferable vote would prevent strategic voting. After extensive quantitative research, Bartholdi and Orlin found that it was extremely difficult to vote strategically rather than preferentially under the single transferable vote (p. 352). They state:

Strategies to manipulate STV are complex and instance-specific, since such behavior is the hallmark of NP-complete problems. Also, our results show how a would-be manipulator is constrained to plot his strategy in an STV election: he cannot do significantly better than enumerative search for an effective preference” (Bartholdi & Orlin, 1991, p. 352).

Based on this evidence, the single transferable voting system is essential in solving the strategic voting problem in Canada.

Second, it is important to explore the different mixed electoral system options. The Law Commission of Canada (2004) states along with aspects of proportionality, these systems have “the accountability and geographic representation that is one of the strengths of first-past-the-post” (p. 83). The mixed-member proportional system is crucial in sincere voting. The Law Commission of Canada defines mixed-member proportional representation as having two separate votes; one for the federal party and one for local candidates (p. 83). According to Warren (2017), some type of proportional representation may be beneficial to Canada’s political activity and the country as a whole (p. 89).

The Problem with Strategic Voting and the Popularity Vote

In 2015, electoral reform was on the agendas of the political parties in Canada. Liberal Party leader, Justin Trudeau, that the first-past-the-post system would be abolished if he was elected. However, this notion was ultimately diminished by Justin Trudeau once the Liberal Party

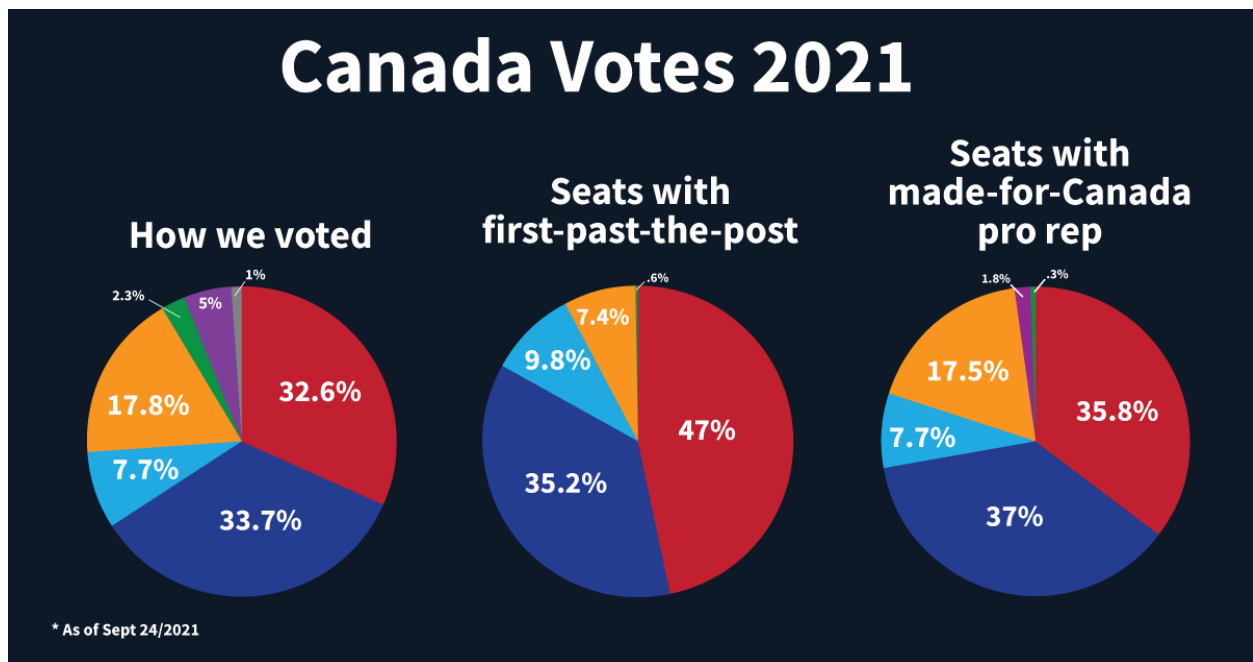
was elected in 2015. The abandonment of this action item received much negative media coverage. CBC journalist, Dhillon (2021) writes, “Canadians from across the country have emailed CBC News to express their frustration with an elections system they say still doesn't properly reflect how people vote” (p. 2).

Strategic voting, according to Abramson et al. (2010), is defined as a situation in which, “the voter evaluates how his or her vote will influence the outcome and casts his or her vote so as to obtain as favorable an outcome as possible” (p. 65). But why is this a problem in Canada? For many people, strategic voting means voting for a less preferred party more likely to win an election in order for their vote to matter. In turn, this reflects the popular vote extremely poorly. As Warren (2017) states, “Canada’s single-member plurality system [first-past-the-post] magnifies the powers of pluralities, so much so that it can produce majority governments with around 38 per cent of the vote, and with as few as 24 per cent of eligible voters when our relatively low voter turnout is figured in” (p. 88). Under the current electoral system, many Canadian citizens are unable to vote for their most preferred party as they believe this vote would not matter in the final electoral outcome.

Electoral reform is essential to prevent strategic voting and better reflect the popular vote in Canada. Bartholdi and Orlin (1991) conducted a quantitative study that provides evidence as to why a single transferable voting system would prevent strategic voting (p. 341). A single transferable voting (STV) system means that “each voter submits a total order of the candidates. STV tallies votes by reallocating support from "weaker" candidates to "stronger" candidates and excess support from elected candidates to remaining contenders” (Bartholdi & Orlin, 1991, p. 343). Essentially, the STV system ranks candidates in order of the voter’s preferences. Based on their research, Bartholdi and Orlin conclude that the single transferable voting system is

ultimately “resistant to manipulation” (p. 341). They state that “thus STV is apparently unique among voting schemes in actual use today in that it is computationally resistant to manipulation. It might be that this resistance can help protect the integrity of social choice” (p. 341). By implementing the STV (or ranked) voting system on a federal level, citizens have the freedom to vote for the party that aligns with their values, rather than voting to protect against a certain party. Ultimately, this will reflect the popular vote more accurately, and Canada will have a better sense of political direction and integrity (See Table 1 below).

Table 1: Seats won for first-past-the-post and theoretical proportional representation based on how Canada voted (Fairvote Canada, 2021)



Solving the Federal versus Local Issue

In order for the single transferable voting system to be as simple as possible, Canadian citizens must rank the party candidates directly (i.e., 1. Justin Trudeau, 2. Jagmeet Singh, etc.). But where does this leave the local riding votes? By including a mixed-member proportional

aspect into the voting system, Canadians would be able to vote separately for their preferred local Member of Parliament (MP) as well as a federal party vote. Not only does this complement the proposed federal ranked voting system, it also solves the issue of individuals wanting to vote for different parties in their local ridings versus federal candidates. Once again, with two votes, Canadians will be inclined to vote for parties that align with their values and ultimately diminish strategic voting.

According to the Law Commission of Canada (2004), a mixed-member proportional system is when:

Voters are given two votes: one for their constituency representative, and one for a party.

It is the party vote that is primary: a party's share of the seats in parliament is determined by the party vote, and the number of constituency seats it wins is then subtracted from this total. The remaining seats are filled from party lists. (p. 90)

In simpler terms, each Canadian citizen would have two votes; one for the federal party and one for their local riding. Therefore, a vote for a local Conservative MP is not necessarily a vote for the federal Conservative party.

Warren (2017) discusses why an electoral reform, specifically mixed-member proportional representation, is necessary in bettering Canada's electoral system overall because it reinforces integrity and inclusion (p. 89). Warren notes, "it is likely, for example, that our unified power system would actually be more powerful if the governments wielding power benefited from more inclusion and functioned more deliberatively" (p. 89). By implementing a two-vote system in which citizens can vote federally and locally; Canadians will see more value in their candidates and their votes. Providing a second vote for local ridings will push citizens to educate

themselves on different candidates rather than creating a strategy for voting and ultimately increase representation of parties and candidates in the House of Commons.

Ranked Voting improves Diversity in Politics

In the Canadian House of Commons, “white men represented 62 per cent of winning candidates in 2015 and 2019 despite only making up a third of the population” (Fawcett, 2021, p. 9). This is unfortunately the reality of the Canadian political system. As the current Liberal government works toward a more diverse and inclusive country, it is necessary that this ideology be reflected in politics. Fawcett notes that ranked ballot elections took place in London, Ontario’s council election, as well as New York City’s mayoral election (p. 8). Quoting Morgan Sharp, Fawcett (2021) states:

The slate of councillors elected in the province’s [Ontario] first ranked ballot experiment includes newcomers who are young, gay, Black and Indigenous, boosting the claims of the preferential voting system’s advocates that it creates a more democratic, more equitable, and more inclusive political system (p. 8).

In terms of political representation, Fawcett suggests that a single transferable voting system contributes to a more diverse set of politicians and leaders as many current leaders are white males (p. 8). Strategic voting occurs when voters cast their ballot for a party more likely to win rather than the preferred party. Based on Fawcett’s statistics, on the number of white, male candidates, strategic voting contributes to a lack of representation in the House of Commons. Unfortunately, underrepresented groups are historically less likely to be elected. With single transferable voting in place, Canadians have the freedom to vote more consciously and honestly. Based on Fawcett’s argument, a ranked voting system will combat the underrepresentation that comes with strategic voting.

Conclusion

The issue of strategic voting in Canada will remain active until an electoral reform is implemented both federally and locally. By enforcing a single transferable voting system and a mixed-member proportional voting system in Canada, the popularity vote will be more accurate. A majority government would be impossible without 50 per cent of the vote (Warren, 2017, p. 88). Additionally, citizens can vote both federally and locally. This promotes voting in an educated and sincere manner, rather than voting based on strategy. Finally, under these two voting systems, Canada can work towards a more diverse political system. Different parties will be more heavily represented, as well as people of colour, women, LGBTQ people, younger politicians and more (Fawcett, 2021, pp. 8-9). Ultimately, these issues are all caused by strategic voting and electoral reform is the best solution to combat voter strategizing. Based on the evidence by the Law Commission of Canada (2004), Bartholdi and Orlin (1991), Warren (2017) and other political media sources, an electoral reform is necessary in solving the problem of strategic voting in Canada.

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