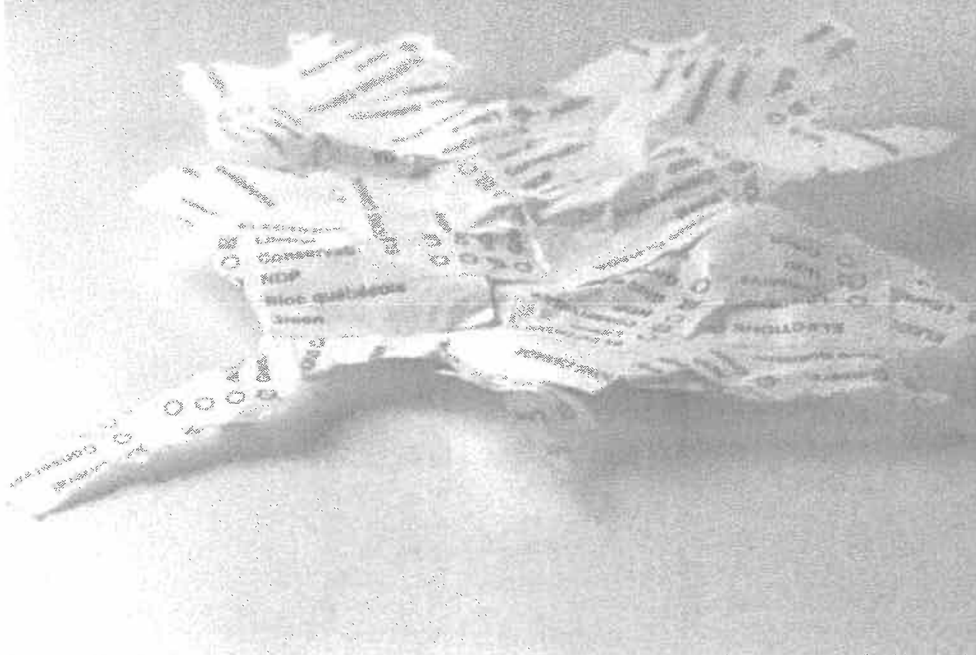
Strengthening Canadian Democracy

Edited by Paul Howe, Richard Johnston and André Blais



Howe, Paul; Johnston, Richard; Blais, André. Strengthening Canadian Democracy.
Montréal, QC, CAN: Institute for Research in Public Policy, 2005. p (4).
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Printed in Canada
Dépôt légal 2005

Bibliothèque nationale du Québec

National Library of Canada
Cataloguing in Publication Data

Howe, Paul, 1966-
Strengthening Canadian democracy
Paul Howe, Richard Johnston, André Blais

Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-88645-187-6

1. Democracy–Canada. 2. Canada–Politics and government.
I. Blais, André, 1947- II. Johnston, Richard, 1948-
III. Institute for Research on Public Policy IV. Title.

JL193.H69 2004 320.471 C2004-904709-4

Proofreading
Timothy Niedermann

Interior Production
Chantal Létourneau

Cover Concept and Design
Schumacher Design

Cover Photo
Carrie MacPherson

Interior Grid Design
Studio Duotone inc.

Published by
The Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP)
L'Institut de recherche en politiques publiques
1470 Peel Sreet, Suite 200
Montreal, Quebec H3A 1T1
Tel: 514 985 2461 Fax: 514 985-2559
email: irpp@irpp.org www.irpp.org

Howe, Paul; Johnston, Richard; Blais, André. Strengthening Canadian Democracy.
Montréal, QC, CAN: Institute for Research in Public Policy, 2005. p (5).
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Howe, Paul; Johnston, Richard; Blais, André. Strengthening Canadian Democracy.
Montréal, QC, CAN: Institute for Research in Public Policy, 2005. p (6).
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Montréal, QC, CAN: Institute for Research in Public Policy, 2005. p (7).
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3

The Alternative Vote

Tom Flanagan

I have to express a degree of agnosticism about comparing the merits of electoral systems. Fifty years of theoretical research deriving from the Arrow General Impossibility Theorem has demonstrated that there is no perfect method of aggregating votes into a collective choice. The criterion of perfection is the "Condorcet winner," that is, the option that would be preferred to all other options in a series of pairwise comparisons. For example, in a three-way choice among options *a*, *b*, and *c*, there might not be a majority for any of the three. But *a* would be the Condorcet winner if a majority preferred it to *b* and to *c*. As such, *a* is the rational choice for the voting group, for a majority of its members prefer no option over *a*.

All voting methods that reach a determinate outcome are capable, under some conditions, of picking an option other than the Condorcet winner, that is, reaching an outcome that, to a majority of the group, is less preferred than one of the other available options. Proportional representation (PR) is an exception, but only because it does not pick a winner at all, at least in the sense of selecting a government or a prime minister. Proportional representation only composes a legislature, which then provides a backdrop against which party leaders negotiate the composition of a government; and a coalition put together in this way could well fail to be a Condorcet winner if presented to the voters. Would the voters of Austria have preferred the coalition of the People's Party and the Freedom Party, which party leaders gave them after the election of 1999, to a coalition of the People's Party and the Social Democrats? We will never know

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Montréal, QC, CAN: Institute for Research in Public Policy, 2005. p 99.
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because the people never got to vote on that choice, but there is no reason to assume that the coalition that took power was actually a Condorcet winner.

If theoretical analysis shows that no electoral method is unambiguously superior to all others, common-sense reflection leads to the same conclusion. Great Britain uses first-past-the-post (FPTP) or single-member-plurality voting; France uses a two-stage run-off; Australia uses the alternative vote (AV) for its House of Representatives; Ireland uses the single transferable vote; the Netherlands uses the list form of proportional representation; Germany uses the so-called mixed-member-proportional system; and Japan used the single non-transferable vote until the 1996 election, when it switched to a parallel combination of PR and first-past-the-post that does not give as proportional an outcome as the German model. Although each of these seven countries has a different electoral system, all have been highly successful for the last 50 years. They have had their ups and downs, to be sure; but by world standards they all enjoy political stability, democratic government and a productive capitalist economy underwriting a high standard of living. I conclude that the success of liberal democracy depends on other factors that all these countries have in common: respect for the constitution; adherence to the rule of law; extension of the franchise to all adults, including racial, linguistic and religious minorities; and protection of property rights. In this tableau, the electoral system is clearly a secondary factor.

Secondary factors, however, are not necessarily unimportant factors. Although any country may succeed or fail with any electoral system, the choice of electoral system does have important consequences for the political system. It affects the number of political parties and their bases of support, the way in which the parties compete or cooperate with one another during election campaigns, and the way in which they behave when they are in government or in opposition. Although no electoral system is demonstrably the best as a general proposition, it is quite possible that a certain electoral system will be better suited than others to the needs of a particular country at a particular stage in its history.

That is the context for pondering electoral reform in Canada. Although Canada is a highly successful country, it has recurrent problems of political fragmentation, which many scholars, from Alan Cairns onward, have plausibly traced to reliance on first-past-the-post voting. Would another system work better, if not in general, at least for Canada at this point in our history?

To seek an appropriate remedy, we must first be clear about the nature of the malady. Like Richard Johnston, I see Canada's enduring political problem as a tendency for political parties to fragment along linguistic and regional lines, thus exacerbating regional and linguistic tensions and even encouraging separatist movements. This tendency was apparent as early as 1885, with the formation of

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Montréal, QC, CAN: Institute for Research in Public Policy, 2005. p 100.
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Honoré Mercier's Parti National as a reaction to the hanging of Louis Riel, and again in 1911, with the entry of Henri Bourassa's Nationalist League into electoral politics. Then came the era of Western-based parties, with the entry into federal politics of the Progressives in 1921 and Social Credit and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation in 1935. Finally we have the events of recent history, with the creation of the Reform Party of Canada in 1987 and the Bloc Québécois in 1990. Each time a new party emerged, one or both of the historic parties, the Conservatives and Liberals, lost a large bloc of regionally or linguistically concentrated voters. The Conservatives have been more battered than the Liberals, but the latter have also suffered huge losses at times, such as in 1921, when they lost the western farm vote to the Progressives, or 1984, when the francophone voters of Quebec switched *en masse* from the Liberals to the Conservatives, as a dress rehearsal for the creation of the Bloc Québécois.

A century of splitting old parties along regional and linguistic lines and creating new ones gave us the 1993-2003 five-party federal system, in which only the Liberals had the breadth of support necessary to win an election. Although they commanded only about 40 percent of the vote in a five-party contest, they were undoubtedly a Condorcet winner in that period. Polling data on voters' second choices made it clear that none of the other four parties could have come close to beating the Liberals in a two-party contest. In that sense, the fact that first-past-the-post voting gave the Liberals over half the seats with only 40 percent of the popular vote was not really unfair; rather, it reflected their underlying strength as a Condorcet winner.

Yet all was not well. Even if the Liberals were a Condorcet winner in the five-party configuration, it was unhealthy to have only one potential winner. A party that can always count on winning is likely to become unresponsive and even corrupt. Indeed, by the late 1990s, the "usual operation" of Jean Chrétien's Liberals had started to resemble the unrestrained cronyism of the PRI in Mexico and the Christian Democrats in Italy in their heyday.

The underlying cause of this tendency toward political fragmentation is the imposition of a parliamentary form of government with disciplined parties upon a sprawling, diverse country. In contrast, the American executive does not require the support of the legislature to remain in power, and thus political parties do not need to be as disciplined as Canadian parties. Republicans and Democrats coming from various parts of the United States and holding divergent views on many issues can cheerfully coexist within their respective parties, because there is no need for party members to vote the same way all the time. Canada could deal with the fragmentation of political parties by adopting an American-style system based on the separation of powers; but after two centuries of parliamentary government, most

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Montréal, QC, CAN: Institute for Research in Public Policy, 2005. p 101.
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Canadians would regard such action as extreme and even treasonous. Tinkering with the electoral system is a less drastic remedy.

The problem, to repeat, is the tendency of Canada's parties to split along linguistic and regional lines. Because it levies heavy penalties upon small parties, the first-past-the-post electoral system tends to discourage fragmentation in general. But it has one exception that actually encourages fragmentation in Canada's case: New parties with regionally concentrated support can thrive for long periods of time by playing to the voters in their territorial base. In this respect FPTP may not be the best electoral system for Canada.

Proportional representation, as proposed by Nick Loenen, Henry Milner, Louis Massicotte and many others, would recognize the tendency toward fragmentation and carve it in electoral stone. New parties would crowd in to join those already represented in Parliament. The Greens would almost certainly surmount any reasonable threshold for representation, as they have in many other PR countries. The new Conservative Party might well split along lines of cleavage between fiscal and social conservatives, or western and eastern supporters. The Liberals might also split if — to take only one example — pro-life Catholic voters concluded they might have more influence as a separate party than as a largely submerged voting bloc within the Liberal Party. If Canada adopts PR, all future governments will be coalitions of two or more parties — perhaps even minority coalitions dependent on other parties for their survival, as has been the case in New Zealand since adoption of MMP.

The style of politics engendered by PR would be novel for Canada. I am sure we could adapt to it and perhaps even prosper with it, but I am not sure that Canadians should make such a radical leap of faith when less sweeping alternatives are available — alternative voting (AV) as practiced in Australia and the two-stage run-off as practiced in France. Because these two so-called "majoritarian" systems would have much the same practical effect, I will concentrate here on AV, which is in effect a temporally condensed run-off.

Under AV, most things are the same as in the FPTP system to which Canadians are accustomed. The ridings retain the same boundaries and are still represented by a single person, whom residents of the riding can regard as their own member of Parliament. Voters still vote for candidates representing parties rather than for parties as such; no party members are appointed by and represent only the party apparatus. Moreover, Canadians are already familiar to some degree with the alternative vote. A few older citizens may remember it from the 1950s, when it was still in use in provincial elections in Manitoba, Alberta and British Columbia. Others have encountered it in recent years in the process of nominating candidates for election campaigns or choosing a party leader. Even those who have not encountered AV will be aware of the run-off

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Montréal, QC, CAN: Institute for Research in Public Policy, 2005. p 102.
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method, which has been widely used for the same purposes and which is, as noted above, both logically and practically similar to AV.

AV differs from FPTP only in one respect as far as the voter is concerned. Instead of putting an X before the name of the favoured candidate, the voter is required to rank all the candidates from first to last, marking them 1, 2, 3, etc. (Some versions of AV allow the voter to mark only the first choice, or to stop ranking anywhere before the bottom, but these refinements need not be discussed here.) When the ballots are counted the first time, only the first choices are tabulated. A candidate who receives 50 percent plus one or more of the first count is declared elected at that point. If no one has a majority, the candidate with the lowest number of first preferences is removed, and all those ballots are transferred to other candidates based on the indication of second preference. The process of recounting, elimination and vote transfer is repeated until someone emerges with a majority, at which point the victor is declared and the election ceases. With paper ballots, the process can take several hours, or even a couple of days; but if Canada ever modernizes its voting technology, computers could do the recounting almost instantaneously.

If one party is overwhelmingly dominant, or if two big parties compete with each other, AV will give much the same results as FPTP; but in multiparty races, AV opens up a new world of possibilities for cooperation. Political parties can retain their separate identities, organizations and programs while forging electoral alliances with each other by "exchanging preferences," as the Australians call it. Ever since the end of World War I, when AV was introduced, the Liberal Party and the National (previously Country) Party have been encouraging their supporters to vote first for their own candidate but to rank the other party's candidate second. In this way, a Liberal can vote Liberal, and a National can vote National, without guaranteeing a victory for the Labor candidate. If the Labor candidate trails after the first count, then the Liberal or National candidate will win on the second count. If the trailing candidate is Liberal or National, most of the transferred ballots will go to the other; and the Labor candidate will win only if he gets a majority on the second count. The net effect is to allow the Liberal and National Parties to run an effective electoral alliance without splitting the vote so that Labor wins a majority of seats.

Over time, the Liberals and Nationals have taken their cooperation quite far, so that they usually sit in a joint caucus, both in government and in opposition, and negotiate a joint platform at election time. The cooperation is sometimes looser, and it has occasionally broken down altogether, as in 1973, when the two parties fell out with each other during a spell in opposition. But the system also allows cooperation and exchange of preferences to be re-established, which happened in time for the 1974 election.

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If AV had existed in Canada in the five-party period of 1993-2003, it would have been easier for the Reform Party/Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives to deal with each other. Without having to merge, they could have tried to form an electoral coalition on the Australian model. Each party could have run as many candidates as it wanted (though common sense advises against opposing your partner's incumbents), while ameliorating the vote-splitting effects of competition by "trading preferences" with the other party. That is, Reform could have advised its voters to rank the PC candidate second on the ballot, and the Tories could have advised their voters to do the same with the Reform candidate. There would have been some leakage on both sides; voters are not sheep who always act exactly as they are advised. The leakage, however, might well have been balanced by the addition of new supporters who would have seen the coalition as a potential governing alternative to the Liberals.

What about the Bloc Québécois? AV would have done nothing to bring that party into a coalition with Reform and the Tories, but it would have operated in another way to dampen the separatist threat. In the polarized politics of Quebec, the BQ, as the only separatist party, won many seats with a plurality of the vote as the Liberals, Tories, Alliance and NDP split the federalist vote. Even without forming explicit coalitions, it seems likely that many federalist voters in Quebec would have ranked the BQ last and would have given their higher preferences to other federalist parties. Separatist sentiment was too strong for the BQ to be frozen out altogether, but it probably would not have won as many seats under AV as it did under FPTP.

As with PR, the long-term result of bringing AV to Canada would probably be a preponderance of coalition governments. Under PR, however, governing coalitions are put together by party leaders after elections have taken place, whereas under AV the coalitions are formed before elections and the voters get a chance to choose between them. Coalitions tend to be long-lasting, so the voters become familiar with them. In these respects, AV gives voters a higher degree of control over politicians than PR does.

The objection that AV does not yield proportionality between the percentage of popular votes and the percentage of seats a party wins is certainly true. Its operation in this respect is closer to FPTP than to PR. Those to whom proportionality is the highest political value should choose one of the many varieties of PR rather than AV.

In my view, however, proportionality is a purely abstract value of little importance in the real world of politics. I believe what is important is to have governments capable of taking decisive action when needed and to give the voters an effective choice between governing coalitions. For Canada, what is particularly important is to create a political vehicle that can alternate with the

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Liberals in government. If a single party can do that, well and good; but the historical record of political fragmentation in this country suggests that such a party will be difficult to create and probably short-lived if it does emerge.

By allowing separate parties to retain their distinct identities while forming effective electoral coalitions, AV offers Canada a way out of its historic difficulties. The theoretical properties of AV, its long record of encouraging electoral coalitions in Australia, and the similar effect of the closely related run-off system in the French Fifth Republic — all suggest that the alternative vote could play midwife to the birth of a new coalition broad enough to win an election.

AV is based on an understanding of practical problems, modest in scope, only incrementally different from past practice, and easily rescinded if it does not live up to expectations. It is the sort of reform that a cautious people like Canadians could agree to undertake.

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Notes

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