

# **CAN FAIR VOTING SYSTEMS REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE?**

**Facts and figures from  
Arend Lijphart's landmark study:**

***Patterns of Democracy:  
Government Forms and Performance  
in Thirty-Six Countries***

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## Introduction

In *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Democracies* (1999), political scientist and comparative government studies expert Arend Lijphart assessed and compared the performance of majoritarian democracies (associated with winner-take-all voting systems) and consensus democracies (associated with proportional representation systems).

In the introduction, Lijphart explains that majoritarian and consensus democracies diverge in how they answer the fundamental questions: who will do the governing and to whose interests will those governing be responsive? The majoritarian model answers “the majority”, but will also settle, as in the case of Canada, for a plurality of citizens<sup>1</sup>. The consensus model says “the largest possible majority”.

Lijphart notes that the majoritarian model concentrates political power in the hands of a bare majority or a smaller plurality. The resulting political system will tend to be “exclusive, competitive, and adversarial”. The democratic institutions in the consensus model force broader participation in government and broader agreement on government policies. These political systems tend to be “characterized by inclusiveness, bargaining, and compromise...”.<sup>2</sup>

Lijphart’s book explores how these two models of democratic governance produce very real and significant differences in political systems and political culture. Among the points of comparison were:

1. the closeness, or proximity, of government and citizen views
2. overall citizen satisfaction with “the way democracy works”
3. voter turnout for elections
4. political and economic equality among citizens
5. percentage of women serving in parliaments
6. the proliferation of political parties
7. effective economic policy management
8. effective environmental policy management

The following summarizes some of his key findings and conclusions.

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<sup>1</sup> Since WWI, Canada has had only four majority governments which won a majority of the popular vote. For example, the 1997 Liberal government won 51.5% of the seats with only 38.5% of the popular vote.

<sup>2</sup> Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*, 1999, Yale University Press.

## 1. Government-Voter Proximity

Consensus democracies, using proportional representation voting systems, would be expected to have governments more reflective of the political attitudes of the electorate. The evidence supports that expectation.

Lijphart cites a study on government-voter proximity which applied two measures to a series of nations. The first was the distance on a ten point left-right scale between the government position and position of the median voter. The second calculated the percentage of voters between the government position and the median citizen. "The smaller these two distances are," notes Lijphart, "the more representative the government is of the citizens' policy preferences." Both distances are smaller in consensus democracies than majoritarian democracies, with correlations statistically significant at the 5 percent level.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Satisfaction With Democracy

In an era of growing citizen frustration with traditional politics, are there any meaningful differences in public attitudes in majoritarian and consensus democracies?

Lijphart cites an international study in 1995-1996 that measured citizen satisfaction with "the way democracy works in your country." Lijphart reports "citizens in consensus democracies are significantly more satisfied with democratic performance in their countries than citizens of majoritarian democracies; the difference is nearly 17 percentage points."

He points to another study that measured the differences in satisfaction between citizens who voted for the winning party or parties versus those supporting losers. Not surprisingly, supporters of the winning parties were more satisfied. However, the more meaningful measure is the extent of differences between the attitudes of the winners and losers.

"The general pattern discovered...was that in consensus democracies the differences between winners and losers were significantly smaller than in majoritarian democracies...the difference in satisfaction is more than 16 percentage points smaller in the typical consensus than in the typical majoritarian democracy. The correlation is highly significant (at the 1 percent level)."<sup>4</sup>

In other words, while public attitudes about politics and governance are shifting in many nations, people still desire and appreciate a level playing field in the political arena.

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, page 288

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, page 287

### **3. Voter Turnout**

Lijphart points to high voter turnout as an “excellent indicator of democratic quality” because: 1) it illustrates “the extent to which citizens are actually interested in being represented” and 2) “turnout is strongly correlated with socioeconomic status and can therefore also serve as an indirect indicator of political equality; high turnout means more equal participation and hence greater political equality.”

Transitory factors clearly have an effect on turnout (the weather and the presence or lack of highly contentious issues), but studies show that institutional factors also play an important role.

Lijphart reports in the period 1971-1996, consensus democracies and voter turnout were positively correlated, but statistically significant only at the 10 percent level. However, this general comparison doesn’t consider the effect of three other key variables: the existence of compulsory voting laws, the frequency of elections, and the general level of national development. When these variables are controlled, “the effect of consensus democracy on voter turnout becomes much stronger and is now [statistically] significant at the 1 percent level. With these controls in place, consensus democracies have approximately 7.5 percentage point higher turnout than majoritarian democracies.”<sup>5</sup>

### **4. Political Equality**

Lijphart states that “political equality is a basic goal of democracy, and the degree of political equality is therefore an important indicator of democratic quality”. He notes the challenges involved in measuring political equality, but suggests “economic equality can serve as a valid proxy, since political equality is more likely to prevail in the absence of great economic inequalities.”

Lijphart’s assertion that economic equality can serve as a proxy for political equality may be debatable, but he provides a thought-provoking analysis. Regardless of agreement or disagreement on his proxy theory, presumably few would argue that high economic disparity is better than low economic disparity.

After applying two measures of economic disparity (based on comparing the income share of the top and bottom 20 percent of households, and comparing top and bottom deciles), Lijphart concluded consensus democracy is strongly related to lower levels of economic disparity.<sup>6</sup>

### **5. Women in Parliaments**

Much attention has been directed to the continuing low percentages of women serving in democratically elected parliaments. While a variety of cultural, social and political factors have been studied and debated, political scientists have also

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, page 285

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, page 282-283

noted that different voting systems, for example, provide different incentives to parties on what types of candidates to run to maximize electoral success.

Lijphart assessed the percentage of women elected to lower houses from 1971 to 1995 in his thirty-six democracies. The percentage of women in parliament was “strongly and significantly related to the degree of consensus democracy. The percentage of women’s parliamentary representation is 6.7 percentage points higher...in consensus democracies than in majoritarian systems”.<sup>7</sup>

## 6. Number of Parties

Because their voting systems are designed to best reflect the range of political views within the electorate, countries using proportional voting systems generally have more political parties in parliament. But how extensive is this proliferation of parties?

When comparing countries, political scientists consider the effective number of parties. For example, a party without seats is not included in the tally. Political scientists also give more weight to a party with more seats, because it will have more opportunity to have political effect, than a marginal party with very few seats.

Lijphart describes the most widely used calculation, which considers the percentage of seats held by each party.<sup>8</sup> In a nation where two parties each holds exactly half the seats, the effective number of parties would be 2.0. If one party held the great majority of seats, the effective number of parties might drop to 1.5 or so. If a competitive third party won seats, the effective number of parties may jump to 2.5, and so on.

Without going further into the mathematics, Lijphart’s findings based on elections between 1945 and 1996 were interesting. During that period, the effective number of parties was 2.37 for Canada, 2.40 for the U.S. and 2.11 for the UK. That compares to 2.93 for Germany with its mixed proportional system, and only 4.65 for the Netherlands, which has the most proportional voting system in the world, and 4.55 for Israel.<sup>9</sup>

While proportional voting systems allow more parties to win seats, comparing the effective number of parties provides some much-needed perspective. It also provides a good context for the next topic: effective policy-making.

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, page 281. In addition, the Inter-Parliamentary Union reported (April 2002) that the top ten nations with the highest percentages of women in lower or single houses (ranging from 30.0% to 42.7%) were all nations using proportional voting systems. The three industrial democracies still using first-past-the-post voting systems – Canada, UK and the US – ranked 30<sup>th</sup>, 40<sup>th</sup> and 52<sup>nd</sup> respectively.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, page 68.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, page 76-77.

## 7. Policy Effectiveness: The Economy

While critics will generally concede that countries using proportional voting systems are more representative of the electorate, they often charge that the resulting governments are structurally hindered in effective policy-making. While the data cited above on citizen satisfaction already blunts that criticism, Lijphart also assessed policy outcomes in two key policy areas: economic performance and environmental protection.

Critics have long argued that coalition governments, a standard feature in consensus democracies, cannot provide the type of leadership required for economic stability and growth. Lijphart quotes S. E. Finer (1975), who countered that “successful macroeconomic management requires not so much a strong hand as a steady one and that PR [proportional representation] and coalition governments are better able to provide steady, centrist policy-making.” This compares to the policy lurch in majoritarian systems, where elections can produce drastic shifts in government orientation that translate into “sharp changes in economic policy that are too frequent and too abrupt.”<sup>10</sup>

Lijphart assessed various comparative economic studies and concluded the following: 1) “on balance, consensus democracies have a better performance record than majoritarian democracies, especially with regard to the control of inflation but also, albeit much more weakly, with regard to most of the other macroeconomic performance variables...”; 2) “however, the overall results are relatively weak and mixed...few statistically significant correlations were found”; and therefore, 3) “the empirical results do not permit the definitive conclusion that consensus democracies are better [economic] decision-makers and better [economic] policy-makers than majoritarian systems”.

While Lijphart’s assessment indicates supporters of consensus democracies cannot boast of economic superiority, neither can the supporters of majoritarian systems or critics of proportional representation. Lijphart emphasized “the most important conclusion is...majoritarian democracies [contrary to popular myth] are clearly not superior to consensus democracies in managing the economy...”.<sup>11</sup>

## 8. Policy Effectiveness: The Environment

While partisan viewpoints can affect the interpretation of “good environmental management”, Lijphart found two studies that offer reasonably defensible assessments of environmental policy performance.

The first measured national policy performance through a composite index based on carbon dioxide emissions, fertilizer consumption, and deforestation. On a zero to 100 scale, consensus democracies scored 10 points higher. The correlation

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<sup>10</sup> In Canada, the provincial elections over the past 15 years in both British Columbia and Ontario have provided several classic examples of economic policy lurch.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, page 274

was “statistically significant at the 10 percent level and is not affected when the level of development is controlled for.”

But an even better and perhaps less debatable measure of good environmental policy would be energy efficiency. Lijphart used the World Bank’s figures for GDP divided by total energy consumption for the years 1990 to 1994. “The correlation between consensus democracy and energy efficiency is extremely strong (significant at the 1 percent level) and unaffected by the introduction of level of development as a control variable.”<sup>12</sup>

## 9. Conclusions

Supporters of almost every view on political systems can produce one or more studies supporting their case. “Research has shown” is hardly an exclusive claim and Lijphart’s work, like all others, has its critics. Yet Lijphart’s book does present an impressive array of original research and assessment of related studies from which its conclusions are drawn.

What are Lijphart’s general conclusions?

He believes his work has “an extremely important practical implication...the overall performance record of the consensus democracies is clearly superior to that of the majoritarian democracies...”.

For those who are developing new democracies or reforming established democracies “the good news is that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, there is no trade-off at all between governing effectiveness and high-quality democracy – and hence no difficult decisions to be made on giving priority to one or the other objective.”<sup>13</sup>

If Lijphart is right, then the implications for Canada are quite profound.

In the growing debate over Canada’s voting system, few have disputed that our first-past-the-post system usually distorts election results (i.e., a party’s portion of seats may be significantly different from their portion of the popular vote) and that the system usually produces phony majority governments (i.e., one party will have a majority of seats, despite failing to win a majority of the popular vote).

While usually conceding these shortcomings, those who oppose a more proportional voting system in Canada have claimed this is a necessary trade-off for having “good government” and “effective policy-making”. This assertion, Lijphart demonstrates, is simply not supported by the evidence. Canadians can safely rely on what we were taught in school at an early age: good democracy and good government are really one and the same.

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, page 297

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, page 302

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