



## **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: proportional representation (PR) and winner-take-all. We already know that PR is a way of making all votes count and delivering more representative election results. The research cited below goes beyond this, showing that PR outperforms winner-take-all systems also on measures of democracy, quality of life, income equality, environmental performance, and economic growth.

### **Introduction: 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 are based on the idea that just one group of voters – the largest group in each riding – will elect a representative. Winner-take-all systems are designed to produce single party majority governments, in which one party will normally win more than half the seats and all the decision making power, often with less than 50% of the popular vote.

All winner-take-all systems share the same basic flaws: a high percentage of wasted votes, distorted overall 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. These systems are designed to produce a legislature which is representative of the views of citizens. PR systems are based on the principle that the number of seats a party earns in a legislature should closely match the percentage of voters who voted for it. PR tends to produce legislatures which better reflect the diversity of views in the population 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 the genuine 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.

## Measures of Democracy

Arend Lijphart (1999 and 2012), a world-renowned political scientist, spent his career studying the differences in 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, and 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 democracy, even when the party they voted for was not in power.
- There was only a marginal increase in the number of parties in Parliament.
- Eight percent more women were elected.

Lijphart concluded that consensual (PR) democracies were "kinder, gentler democracies" (p. 293).

Lipjhart's finding that proportional systems created governments that better reflect the views of the median voter was confirmed by McDonald, Mendes and Budge (2004), which looked at 254 elections producing 471 governments in 20 countries.

Pilon (2007, p. 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. However, he describes the "typical bonus" of voter turnout under PR to be in the order of 7 to 8% percentage points.

## Health, Education, Standards of Living

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."

## 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.

Looking at a much longer historical period, Knutsen (2011) looked at 3,710 country-years of data covering 107 countries from 1820 to 2002. He found that both proportional and semi-proportional systems produced an "astonishingly robust" and "quite substantial" increase in economic growth (a 1 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

credible economic policies. He concludes that PR and semi-PR systems generate more prosperity than plural-majoritarian systems.

### **Income Inequality**

The choice of voting systems also affects the level of income inequality. Lijphart (2012) found that countries with proportional systems had significantly much lower levels of income inequality (p. 282).

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.

### **Environment**

Looking at environmental performance, Lijphart (2012), 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.

Darcie Cohen (2010) found that countries with proportional systems were faster to ratify the Kyoto protocol, while their share of world total carbon emissions had declines, while it increased or stayed the same in other countries.

### **Stability**

One of the biggest debates about PR is whether it leads to political instability. This subject is well discussed by Pilon (2007: 146-154), who finds the arguments and evidence against PR wanting 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 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.

Pilon comments on existing 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, he calculates that countries using First Past

the Post averaged 16.7 elections, while countries using proportional systems averaged only 16.0 elections (Pilon, 2007). 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 cabinet shuffles (p. 147). He concludes that instability is “not a problem for PR systems in western countries” (p. 151).

## Is perfect proportionality needed to have an impact?

Also important when considering options for electoral reforms is the **degree** of proportionality that is required to have an impact. This subject was the primary research question covered by Carey and Hix (2009 and 2011). Their results show that moderately proportional systems involving 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). Meanwhile, a moderately proportional approach helped to retain some of the purported advantages of majoritarian systems by limiting party fragmentation and the number of parties represented in government coalitions (2011: Figures 4 and 5). They point to countries such as Costa Rica, Hungary, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain that appear to have discovered a ‘sweet spot’ of this sort in the design of their electoral systems (2011: 384).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the results from the existing body of comparative research could not be any clearer: In terms of impact on different areas of socio-economic life, PR outperforms winner-take-all systems on measures of democracy, quality of life, income equality, environmental outcomes, and economic growth.

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