In Defense of Majoritarianism

- Stanley L. Winer, Carleton University

Conference Sponsor(s):

- Faculty of Public Affairs
- Partners:
- Presenting sponsor:
- Manulife
In Defense of Majoritarianism

Stanley L. Winer*

March 3, 2017

Abstract

Few people have bothered to defend the Majoritarian, winner take all character of the current Canadian electoral system. This parliamentary system has been in existence in the same form since the founding of the modern state in 1867. In these remarks, I offer a defense of Majoritarianism in the Canadian context when the alternative is some form of Proportional Representation. These remarks were prepared as an opening statement in a debate on electoral reform at a Faculty of Public Affairs 75th Anniversary conference at Carleton University, March 3, 2017.

The debate arose because of the Prime Minister's announced intention to replace the current system with some other during the election campaign that led to his victory in 2015. The debate occurred a few months after the release of a lengthy report on electoral reform by a special all-party committee of the House of Commons. A few weeks before the debate, the Prime Minister announced (independently of the debate, of course) that his government would no longer pursue electoral reform, perhaps because it looked like he would not be able to avoid a referendum, a process which is hard to control. In any event, and especially in the light of recent attempts to change the system both at the federal level and in some provinces, I think it is important for people to understand that the existing electoral system is a sensible one that likely will continue to serve us well.

* Canada Research Chair Professor in Public Policy, School of Public Policy and Administration, Department of Economics and Ottawa-Carleton Graduate School of Economics, Carleton University, Ottawa (stanley.winer@carleton.ca). My thanks to Arnaud Dellis, Stephen Ferris and Bernard Grofman for feedback on early drafts.
1. Introduction

Few people have bothered to defend the Majoritarian, winner take all character of our current electoral system in which the party with the largest number of seats, each won with a plurality at the constituency level, is granted a franchise to govern by itself for a maximum term. I am going to explain why this system, which has worked reasonably well for 150 years, deserves to be maintained. This does not mean that I reject any kind of electoral reform. Nor must you do so in order to agree with the argument I will present. I am happy later to discuss matters such as specific voting rules for constituency elections including the Alternative Vote, campaign finance, the participation of public sector unions in electoral contests, general participation rates, fixed election terms, and so on. But these matters are not the critical issue we must confront.

One defense of our Majoritarian system that has been offered over the past year, and that you may have heard, is that our winner take all system makes it difficult for dangerous people or ideas to gain formal representation in the legislature when compared to the essential alternative, which is some form of Proportional Representation. This may be so, but it too is not the critical issue that we have to deal with. Nor do I think it is the most important matter when thinking about the maintenance of civil liberty, which depends on the countervailing system of institutions that constrain governments and other special interests from interfering too deeply in our private lives.

2. The Main Argument

The critical and most difficult issue before us in this debate is how to deal with the leap of faith required in going from representative government, on the one hand, to good government, on the other. By good government, I mean a sustainable, democratic system that contributes substantially to our social and economic well-being. Whether we choose to err on the side of principles of responsibility if we stay with our existing Majoritarian system, or to err on the side of principles of representation if we adopt Proportional Representation in some form, we must make a well considered leap of faith in judging which system best promotes 'good' government in this sense. This leap is analogous to the one that was an essential ingredient in the 1988 election fought between political parties opposing and promoting freer trade with the United States.

How are these fundamentally different principles supposed to work in choosing a legislature? In the Proportional vision, an election is a means of obtaining a representative legislature that mirrors organized opinions in the country by assigning seats to parties more or less in proportion to their share of the national vote.

The Majoritarian vision is radically different. An election is not a means of producing a representative legislature, though it may do so in an electoral equilibrium or outcome. It is in the first instance a means for voters to impose a government on a legislature, and to give the
government the means to act decisively during the life of the legislature. Each government obtains and uses its franchise for a limited period, and then is re-evaluated to see if the franchise should be renewed or given to another party. This is what we mean by responsible government: a government able to act decisively and which can, as a result, be clearly held responsible for its actions.

How do these principles actually work out? What is clear is the effect of either system on the equilibrium number of parties in Parliament, which is well short of what we want to know about how good government is best nurtured. The Majoritarian system we have now leads to a smaller number of parties, while Proportionality will lead to a larger number. Usually government under PR is a coalition of smaller parties that is produced after the general election, sometimes long after - it took 541 days to form a government in Belgium after the 2010 election - since one party will rarely have a majority of seats and the formation of the government will depend on negotiation among parties represented in the legislature.

Note that unlike PR where the formation of government is handed over to the parties after the vote, under Majoritarianism voters are directly responsible for electing a government and, as a result, usually vote for national parties regardless of local candidate, which is part of its greater emphasis on accountability. The trade-off here - and every electoral system necessarily involves trade-offs - is that national votes and seats in Parliament are not proportional.

The most difficult part of the assessment we have to make concerns what happens after the legislature is chosen. Here we have to rely on arguments about how things evolve in the long run -- that is, about what public policies are adopted and about how these government actions affect our lives over many years. If you think that's hard to deal with, your right. If you think it doesn't matter, and we can make a choice between electoral systems without going into into such deep waters, I beg to differ. Maintaining a system of self-government that actually improves the way we and our children live is the central problem.

Under PR, good government in this important sense is made subservient to balanced party representation in the legislature in the hope that in the long run, the two will be the same. In the Majoritarian vision, good government is made subservient to the election of a government that can act decisively and accountably over its term, with the hope that in the long run the two will be the same.

PR systems, by design, produce representation in the legislature in accordance with each party's percentage of votes. If a portrait of society in the legislature that reflects voting by party is what you want, regardless of how this works out in the end, there is no better alternative. But a judgement on this basis alone would be short-sighted.

1 In a U.S. presidential system, a Majoritarian system, there are separate votes for the executive and for the legislature, while in the Westminster system, the two are effectively combined in one vote.

2.1 Encouraging good government

How can we go further? Consider this: In any democratic system, it is essential that parties face the prospect of losing office, that they do lose from time to time, and that they also face the prospect of returning to office. The prospect of losing office induces the parties to cater to all sorts of voters by never moving too far towards their own party’s most preferred choices at the great expense of various minority interests. They do this because (risk averse) voters do not like to be jerked around (e.g. from left to right, and then vice versa) when partisan control changes. We all spend a lot of money to buy insurance against bad things happening for essentially the same reason. As a result, we see substantial continuity in major policies across adjacent governments. In other words, the prospect of alternation in office forces majorities to consider the interests of various minorities, even if they are not well organized, provided that the parties also see some prospect of returning to office if they are defeated.3 (Otherwise they have nothing to lose by pursuing their narrowest self-interest.)

Herein lies an important reason for the Majoritarian, winner take all system to have a stronger claim to our attention. Because of the plurality rule at the local level, and because of the incentive that voters have to desert candidates and parties that are likely to be defeated, a small change in popular vote for a party can have large and even devastating consequences for the total number of seats the party wins, depending on how its total popular vote is distributed across electoral districts. Remember the Conservative incumbent government that dropped from 169 to 2 seats for a seat share of 0.6% in the 1993 election, while their popular vote dropped from 43% but only to 16%. In contrast, in a PR system, a small change in vote shares leads only to a small change in seat shares, allowing losing parties to remain in a governing coalition.

Thus the disproportionality in votes and seats by party that proponents of PR often point to as a primary defect of the existing system is, from the Majoritarian point of view, an essential strength, helping to create and maintain the turnover that is a source of reasonably efficient and harmonious public policy.

If I have time later4, I can show you that indexes of disproportionality peaked when Diefenbaker threw out the Liberals with a huge majority after more than 25 years in 1958, when Mulroney again soundly defeated the Liberals in 1984 after 20 years of Liberal governments, when the Liberals under Chretien destroyed the Conservative party for a decade in 1993, and when Harper won a clear majority of seats in 2011.

2.2 Protection against bad government

There is a second, related, and important advantage of the Majoritarian vision. While the Majoritarian system by its nature creates conditions conducive to turnover, neither electoral

---


4 See the Appendix.
vision contains any absolute guarantee as to the goodness of the government that emerges over
the longer run. How could they?

The philosopher Karl Popper took up the question of what sort of system we ought to adopt in
the absence of such a guarantee, and in view of the fundamental difficulty of agreeing on what
'good' government means.\(^5\) He concluded that the best political system is one that is better at
avoiding situations in which a really bad government does too much harm. \textit{From this point of
view, we could say that the best electoral system is the one that allows a bad government to be
replaced most easily.}

Which of the electoral systems we are considering is better in this sense? Without doubt, it is the
Majoritarian one. Obviously we wont always or even usually agree on what 'bad' means in this
context. But in choosing between systems, we can agree to build in a bias against renewing the
franchise of a government about which a sizeable group of citizens is substantially displeased,
rather than adopt a system that is more robust to such opposition.

3. Concluding remarks

Canada has had the \textit{same} winner take all electoral parliamentary system since its founding in
1867, and the country has developed into one of the better places on earth to live. This is not
only because we are endowed with natural resources - there are several countries with similar
endowments that are worse places to live. Of course these facts do not tell us what the
counterfactual under PR would have been like; maybe Canada would have been heaven on earth.
But if you want to proceed cautiously when important, hard to reverse decisions are involved,
these facts are not irrelevant.

Finally, I return to the main issue, which is conceptual as much as empirical. Choosing between
proportional and majoritarian electoral systems requires us either to err on the side of principles
of representation, or to err on the side of principles of responsibility. Both choices necessarily
involve a leap of faith as to what system best promotes good government. PR produces a
representative legislature by design, but that does not guarantee \textit{good} government.
Majoritarianism is a sensible a way of encouraging good government, and is \textit{also} a sensible way
of protecting ourselves against bad ones. There is no compelling reason to destroy our
Majoritarian parliamentary system, which has the characteristics I have outlined and which, \textit{as a
consequence}, is likely to serve us reasonably well in the future.

Appendix. Votes, seats and proportionality in the Canadian electoral system

What follows is a brief, lighthearted introduction to indexes of proportionality in the Canadian context.


Here and below, \( V_i \) refers to the national vote share of party \( i \), while \( S_i \) refers to its seat share in Parliament.

(ii) Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada's first Prime Minister, contemplates the Loosemore-Hanby (1971) index of proportionality:
(iii) In the following diagram, based on work by undergraduate research student Meghan Byars, the two indexes are graphed for the 19th to the 42nd election. The correspondence of substantial government turnovers to peaks in the indexes, referred to in the text, is clearly apparent. In the figure a 'C' refers to the Conservative party, and a 'L' refers to the Liberal party. A subscript 'vs' refers to a vote share, and a subscript 'ss' refers to a seat share.

References:

