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In Defense of Majoritarianism

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Abstract

The majoritarian parliamentary electoral system of Canada has been in existence in the same form since the founding of the modern state in 1867. In this short paper I offer a defense of Majoritarianism when the alternative is some form of Proportional Representation. While the individual arguments I employ are well known, the train of reasoning here is, to my knowledge, unusual in the current Canadian context.

These remarks were prepared as an opening statement for a debate on electoral reform at a Faculty of Public Affairs conference in honor of Carleton University's 75th anniversary, 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 several 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 electoral system both at the federal level and in some provinces, I think it is important for people to understand why the existing electoral system is a sensible one that likely will continue to serve us reasonably well.

Key words: electoral reform, Canada, majoritarianism, proportional representation, index of proportionality, principle of representation, principle of responsibility, good government, leap of faith.

JEL codes: D70, D72.

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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, alternative mechanisms for election of the Canadian Senate, 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 or read about, 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.¹

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.

¹ The argument below is augmented with some footnotes on specific issues, which were not generally part of the formal debate that took place.

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.² 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.³

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.

² 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.

³ The problem of disproportionality raised in the text is also widely referred to by proponents of PR as the problem of 'false majorities'. It should be recognized, however, that this is a pejorative term that has meaning only if you *start* with principles of representation in mind. From the responsibility perspective, in the argument that follows, disproportionality is a *virtue*. One should also note that trade-offs are not confined to the votes-seats issue. See Myerson (1993) for a model allowing a comparison of 'corruption' in the electoral equilibrium of different electoral systems including the majoritarian and proportional forms. Electoral competition in a Majoritarian system may not always eliminate undesirable (corrupt or 'dangerous') parties or party leaders when compared to Proportionality, because it may be advantageous for voters to support a 'bad' candidate (who still would offer some value to the voter) that others also support than to vote for a 'better' leader who no one supports. This takes us back to the issue of civil liberty raised earlier, the maintenance of which requires that constraints be placed on the domain of politics. The need for such constraints is widely acknowledged, and the argument being made here is for Majoritarianism in a constitutional or liberal democracy as opposed to a system of unfettered majority (or plurality) rule.

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.⁴

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.

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.⁵ (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

⁴ This approach is inspired by Scott Gordon in "The Bank of Canada in a System of Responsible Government", *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 27(1), 1961.

⁵ See Adam Przeworski. *Democracy and the Limits of Self-Government*. Cambridge University Press, 2010: 144-145, and the references therein.

strength, helping to create and maintain the turnover that is a source of reasonably efficient and harmonious public policy.

If I have time later⁶, 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 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.⁷ 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. *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 won't 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 *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

⁶ See the Appendix.

⁷ See Karl Popper. "The open society and its enemies revisited". *The Economist*. April 23, 1988: 19-22.

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 *good* government. Majoritarianism is a sensible way of encouraging good government, and is *also* a sensible way of protecting ourselves against bad ones. In my view, there is no compelling reason to destroy our Majoritarian parliamentary system, which has the characteristics I have outlined and which, *as a consequence*, is likely to serve us reasonably well in the future.

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

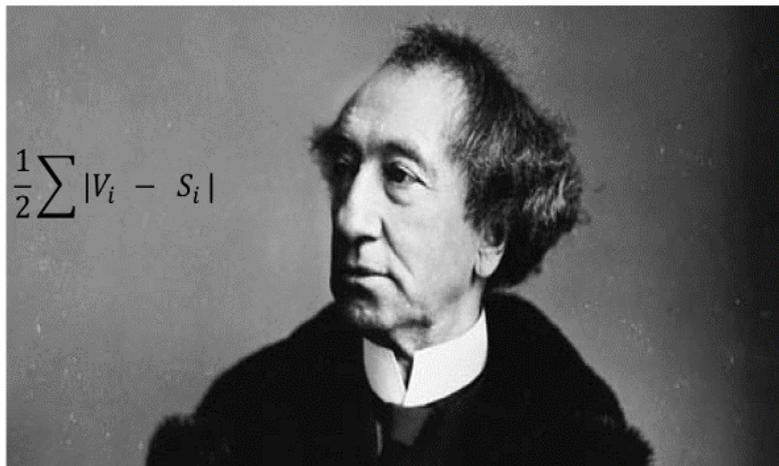
What follows is a brief introduction to indexes of proportionality in the Canadian context.

The standard Gallagher (1991) index of proportionality of votes and seats is the following, where V_i refers to the national vote share of party i , while S_i refers to its seat share in Parliament:

$$\sqrt{\frac{1}{2} \sum_i (V_i - S_i)^2} .$$

This index was actually discussed in Parliament during debates concerning electoral reform.

In the following picture, Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada's first Prime Minister, contemplates the Loosemore-Hanby (1971) index of proportionality, which has a simpler form, but leads to a similar pattern of results for Canada:

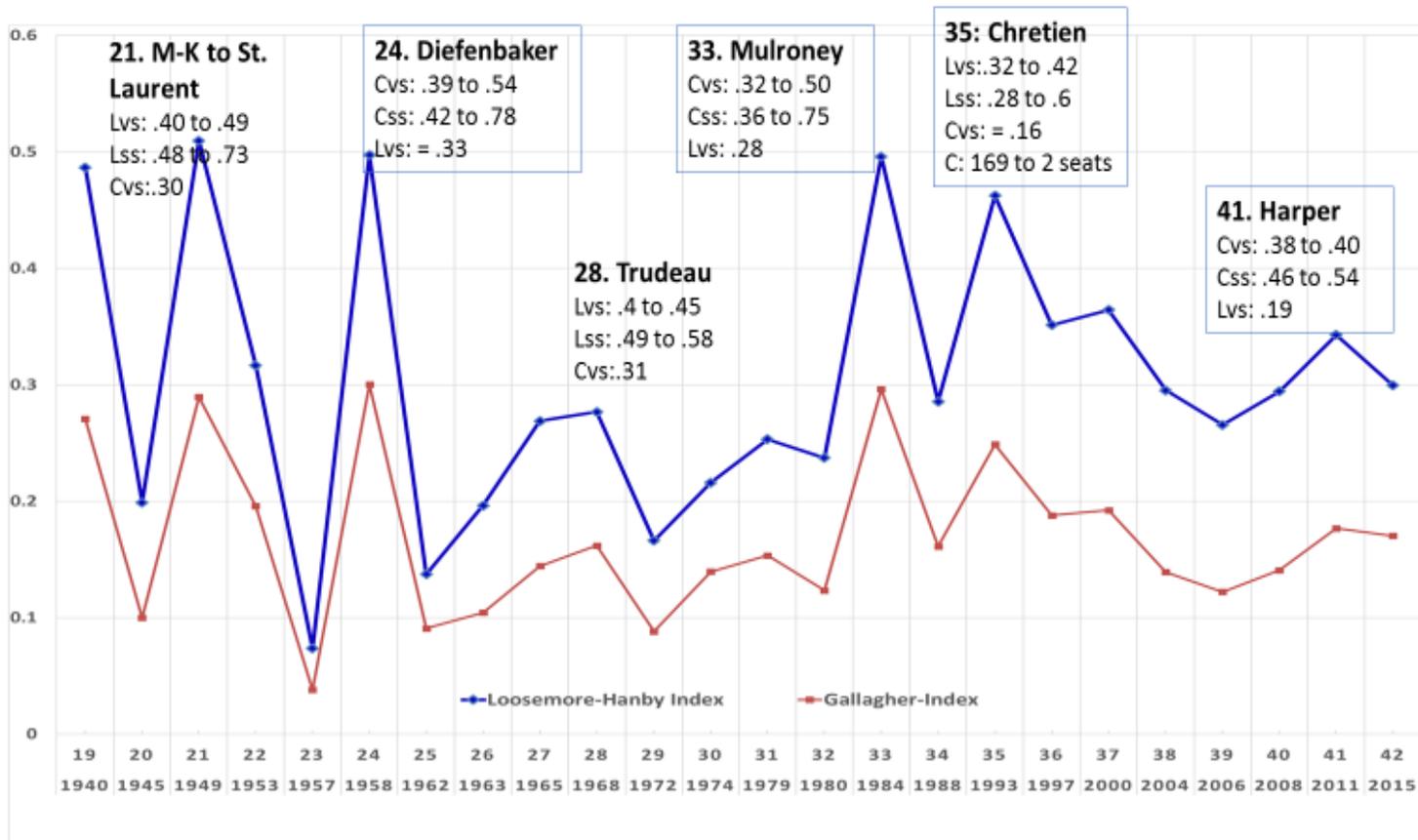


Taagepera and Grofman (2003) compare these and other indexes of proportionality from an axiomatic point of view, and conclude that they are both useful and better than others that have been proposed.

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 post WWII period in Canada. 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. The changes in shares referred to in the boxes are from the election prior to the one whose number is cited in the boxes.

Loosemore-Hanby and Gallagher Indexes of Proportionality



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