

Single Member-Proportional Vote

(SM-PV)

A description of a weighted vote electoral system for ensuring Proportional Representation for multi-party parliamentary democracies using single member constituencies.

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Single Member-Proportional Vote is meant to be a replacement for the current FPTP electoral system currently used for the Canadian House of Commons. This submission goes over the system's basic structure and function. It also looks at SM-PV's advantages over other electoral systems as well as Canadian public opinion about electoral reform in general.

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Introduction: Single Member-Proportional Vote

There has been a great deal of discussion for a number of years on the topic of electoral reform. It appears to me that a major sticking point has been that the systems proposed all favour one party or another. I started working on this proposal with a desire to reconcile those who support proportional representation with those who prefer First-past-the-post (FPTP). The result was a system I called **Single Member-Proportional Vote (SM-PV)**. In April Maryam Monsef, Minister of Democratic Institutions, outlined the eight features that the new electoral system should have. SM-PV does a good job of meeting each standard as I will demonstrate.

What Stays the Same...

SM-PV retains most of the structure of FPTP. Each voter still gets one vote to cast in the election. MPs are still elected in single-member constituencies. Governments are still formed on the basis of seat totals. In fact the number of electoral ridings and seats in Parliament need not be changed at all. This meets three of Minister Maryam Monsef's requirements: **1.** that the new electoral system not make the electoral system any more complex, **2.** that localized links between voters and MPs be maintained and **3.** that voting should be user-friendly and accessible. The fact that ridings and voting methods do not change with SM-PV also means that Elections Canada will not be burdened with operational changes which they estimate could take two years to complete under other proposed systems.

...and What Changes

The differences for SM-PV start with how MP votes on legislation are counted once Parliament reconvenes. Currently each MP has one *equal vote* on bills before Parliament. Under SM-PV each MP has a vote that is stronger or weaker depending on how much of the popular vote their party received during the election. If a party wins more seats than the popular vote would normally entitle them their MPs will have weaker votes to compensate. If a party wins fewer seats than the popular vote would normally entitle them their MPs will have stronger votes. Thus the ability of parties to pass legislation through Parliament will more closely mirror how much support each party received during the previous election. This means that under SM-PV Parliament would operate with a system of *weighted votes*.

The 2015 Federal Election under FPTP

The 2015 General Federal Election resulted in a Liberal majority government of 184 seats (54%) with 39.5% of the popular vote. The Conservatives formed the Official Opposition with 99 seats (29%) after getting 31.9% of the popular vote. The NDP won 44 seats (13%) with 19.7% of the popular vote. The Bloc won 10 seats (3%) with 4.7% of the popular vote. And lastly the Greens won a single seat (0.3%) with 3.4% of the popular vote. The result is that the Liberal Party can pass legislation without having to consult with the other parties.

The 2015 Federal Election under SM-PV

Under SM-PV the parties' seat counts would remain the same but legislation would be passed based on share of the popular vote. As a result the Liberal MPs would collectively have roughly 39.5% of the votes in Parliament. The Conservatives would have roughly 31.9% of the votes in Parliament. The NDP would have roughly 19.7% of the votes in Parliament. The Bloc would have roughly 4.7% of the votes in Parliament. And finally the Green Party would have roughly 3.4% of the votes in Parliament. This indirectly meets Minister Maryam Monsef's requirement that the voting results of an election be fairly translated into election results without substantial distortion. While seat totals remain 'unbalanced' it no longer matters since parties will no longer have more power in Parliament than the electoral results say they deserve. SM-PV rejects modifying seat totals (an expensive exercise) as a means of fixing the distortions in our electoral system in favour of modifying votes in Parliament. As parties would have a voting power very similar to their share of the popular vote the 'distortion' is fixed without changing seat totals.

The formula for finding out each individual MP's vote is:

(Popular vote for party X) / (# of MPs in party X) = Voting power of each MP in party X

In essence for passing legislation you would treat the 2015 Parliament as if it were in a minority government situation but a majority government when it came to the government's ability to maintain the confidence of the House. I go into this in further detail in the *Specific Situations Addressed* section at the end.

Use of Weighted Voting in Other Contexts

Currently no legislature uses weighted votes for its members. I speculate this is due to three factors:

1. Legislators don't like the idea that their votes might end up being of a different value.
2. States that abandon FPTP tend to adopt completely new systems rather than reforming FPTP.
3. States that retain FPTP rarely bring in changes that can weaken the governing party.

However, weighted voting is very common in the business world. It is a common rule by which stockholders cast votes. Stockholders don't cast votes on an equal basis, they cast votes based on how many stocks they have. In a way parties under SM-PV would be like 'stockholders' of the popular vote.

"You have obviously put a great deal of thought into this. While I still prefer first past the post, your proposal is certainly preferable to PR."

-Rob Moore, former MP for Fundy Royal

Advantages over First-Past-The-Post

Of course if SM-PV did not solve any of the current issues with FPTP there would be no reason to adopt it. I will outline three specific issues that SM-PV will solve.

End of Wasted Votes

To win an election as a candidate you merely need to get one more vote than the second-place finisher. This is not a common result in Canadian elections and it is more common for the winner to receive several thousand more votes than what is strictly required. While these votes certainly make the winning candidate feel good they are, in fact, 'wasted' as they do little to improve their party's standing in the election. It is as if they had not voted at all. At the same time the votes for every candidate in the hypothetical riding being discussed that failed to win do not help their parties either. Multiplied across 338 ridings this creates a large number of votes that may as well not have been cast for they have not altered the result one bit.

SM-PV solves these problems because no matter what party is voted for it still alters the popular vote totals. And under SM-PV the popular vote matters. All those extra votes that a candidate didn't need to win? Great! They have still raised the popular vote totals of their preferred party and thus strengthened its ability to pass legislation in the new Parliament. All those votes for the candidates that didn't win? They still strengthen their parties' votes in Parliament (or weakened the government's ability to pass legislation depending on your point of view).

End of Strategic Voting

Because votes for your preferred candidate still have an effect on the ensuing Parliament strategic voting becomes unimportant. Vote for the NDP and the NDP vote will be stronger. Vote for the Liberals and the Liberal vote will be stronger. Vote for the Conservatives and the Conservative vote will be stronger. Under FPTP if a person wants to weaken the Conservatives in their riding they would have to vote for whichever one of the other parties they thought likely to win. Under SM-PV it doesn't matter too much which they vote for since they both have the effect of lowering Conservative vote share. Thus they can vote for their *preferred* choice rather than their *strategic* choice. This advantage (as well as the previous one) will go a long way towards meeting Minister Maryam Monsef's requirement that the new electoral system restore confidence in Canadians ability to influence politics.

Parliament Proportionality

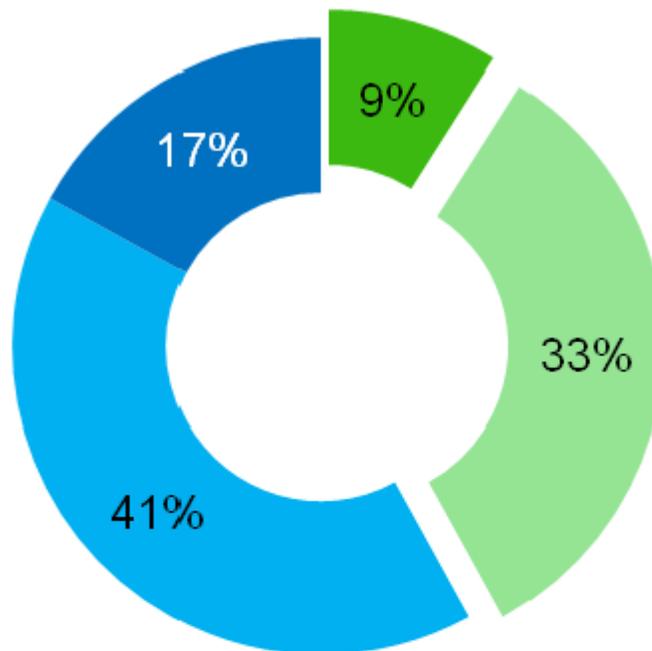
Under FPTP winning parties regularly receive ~30% of the votes, ~51% of the seats, and 100% of the power to pass legislation. SM-PV alters the last part of this formula by altering voting strength. For reasons that I will get into in the *Specific Situations Addressed* section I favour leaving the other two parts of the formula as they are. Under SM-PV the winning party is likely to win ~30% of the votes, ~51% of the seats, but have only ~30% of the power to pass legislation.

Canadian Views on Electoral Reform

While electoral reform is a perennial issue in Canadian politics it has mixed support among the general public. Multiple provincial referendums on the issue have failed. However, it should be noted that in at least one case the YES vote received 60% of votes cast. A recent poll commissioned by the Broadbent Institute has shed some light on what Canadians want in terms of electoral reform in its report '*Canadian Electoral Reform - Public Opinion on Possible Alternatives*'.

Broadbent Institute Poll Examined

Last year the Broadbent Institute published an examination of Canadians attitudes towards electoral reform. While I disagree with some of their conclusions the report is a useful resource. Let us look at what those polled said when asked what they thought about Canada's electoral system:

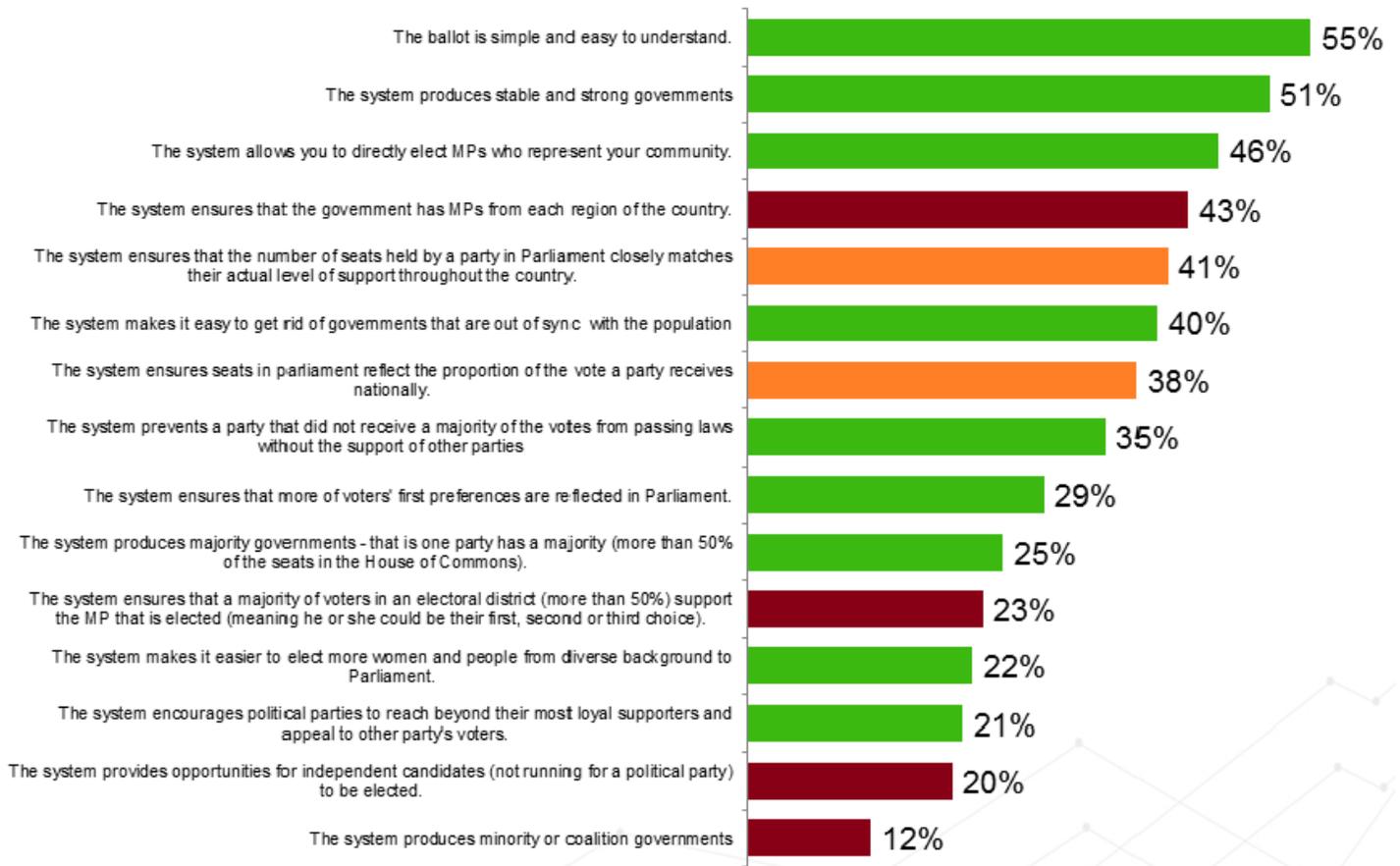


- The system needs to be changed completely.
- The system needs major changes.
- The system only needs minor changes.
- The system works well and does not need to be changed.

Source: Broadbent Institute

As the results demonstrate a majority want some form of electoral reform. This is the spin the Institute put on the results. However, it is equally true that the single largest grouping of opinion states that only minor changes are desired. I argue that SM-PV fits into this desire for minimal change to the electoral system. After all, the people will notice no changes in how elections are actually carried out.

Next the report asked what features of an electoral system were important to them. The results are below. Green bars are features SM-PV supports. Orange bars are features that SM-PV renders unimportant. Red bars are features SM-PV does not support.

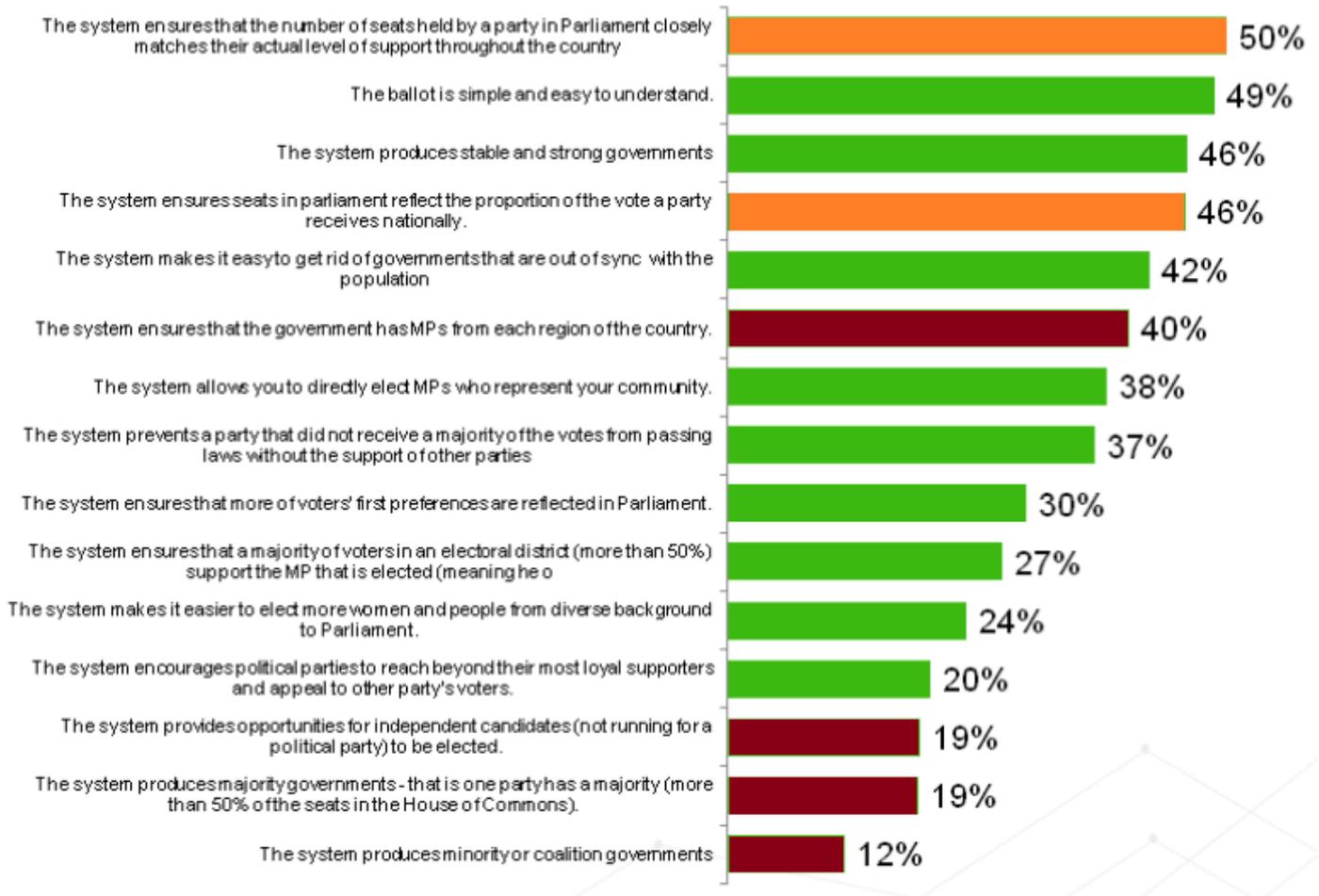


Source: Broadbent Institute (with modifications)

As you can see in almost every important way SM-PV matches the type of system Canadians want. I will address the issue of regional representation in the *Expert Opinions* section.

For the two features above which SM-PV by-passes I'd like to offer a short explanation. Both deal with seat totals. Under FPTP seat totals are a measure of ability to form the government and pass legislation. Under SM-PV seat totals are still used for determining government formation but not the passage of legislation. I believe the ability to pass legislation is the primary concern expressed by those polled. Since SM-PV addresses this issue I have marked it as being by-passed.

Next the Institute looked at the same question but excluded those who didn't want any electoral reform. The results are below:



Source: Broadbent Institute (with modifications)

Once again SM-PV meets Canadians main expectations of their electoral system. It is interesting to note that the top-rated feature (proportionality) and the third-rated feature (strong stable majorities) are directly opposed ideals with the current popular vote totals of the federal parties. Other than SM-PV only Ranked Vote bridges the gap. But Ranked Vote directly violates Canadians second-most desired feature of electoral systems: a simple ballot. It also does not help that the polling data found little support for Ranked Voting. In conclusion I argue that SM-PV is the system most able to give Canadians the features of electoral reform they actually want.

Overall, the report published by the Broadbent Institute paints a contradictory picture. A majority of Canadians either want minor reforms to the electoral system or none at all. But when asked what system they wanted the preference was for proportional systems. ie. Major reform. In this situation SM-PV is uniquely suited to fill the requirements of a credible alternative. It both keeps the current system largely intact but adds elements of proportionality that addresses the short-comings of FPTP.

Expert Opinions

I have been seeking input from many different individuals on the system I have created. What follows is the advice I have received. I have addressed the specific concerns each has raised.

Prof. Andrew Heard, Political Science Professor at Simon Fraser University

"Many thanks for letting me know about your idea for modifying the electoral system. You have a great idea there, in many ways, and it made me pause and think about the possibilities. I do like the advantage of not having to change anything except the weight of each MP's vote. I guess the one possible weakness is that it wouldn't correct the tendency of the first-past-the-post to allow a party to dominate or blank out the other parties in a province or region. The Liberal victory in every seat in Atlantic Canada, in the recent election, is an example."

Prof. Heard brings up a valid point about SM-PV: it doesn't correct the occasional tendency of FPTP to completely block a party out of entire regions. I argue that while FPTP leads parties to abandon regions they are uncompetitive in, SM-PV keeps parties courting these same regions.

Remember that under FPTP votes in ridings where your party doesn't win have no value. A party is thus inclined to target only those where they have a shot at winning. Under SM-PV ignoring a region because you can't win the seat itself is a bad idea as even these formally 'wasted' votes have value to your party.

So while the professor is correct that parties can still be blocked out of regions under SM-PV it will not lead to parties forsaking those regions. It should be noted that entire regional 'lockouts' are rare and don't tend to last more than a single election. As such the issue brought up should be a minor concern.

Scott Reid, Member of Parliament for Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston in 2001

"If we try as a group to select a system in advance I can guarantee that the system will be reviewed and analyzed by each person and each party with one question foremost in mind: how will this help me or how will this hurt me? If any part of the tenuous coalition that we are today beginning to build decides that partisan or personal considerations outweigh the merits of the specific system being proposed, that in itself will likely prove sufficient to kill the proposal."

Perhaps the greatest advantage of SM-PV is that no party is overly disadvantaged by it. The Conservatives and Liberals may be forced to consult with other parties on the passage of legislation more often but would be no less likely to form the government than they are now. The NDP and Greens gain a proportional share of power in Parliament (which generally means more influence) but don't gain the ability to 'hold governments hostage'.

And it benefits all of the parties in another very important way: ridings cannot be gerrymandered effectively. A party may try to cram all of their opponents supporters into one riding. But this does nothing to stop the popular vote from rendering their ill-gotten seat totals irrelevant.

Prof. Tom Flanagan, Political Science Professor at University of Calgary (Retired)

Interesting idea for achieving proportionality without changing the mechanics of voting. It has a certain logical appeal, but I'm not aware that anything like this has ever been tried.

There might well be constitutional problems, because MPs would no longer be equal in voting power. I'm sure someone would argue this is contrary to the preamble to the BNA Act (...a constitution similar in principle to that of the United Kingdom ...").

I think there would be some strategic consequences for electioneering. Parties would no longer aim simply at winning seats; they would also want to maximize their share of the popular vote, in order to get greater leverage in the House of Commons. This would mean working harder to get votes everywhere, even in "hopeless" ridings where outright victory seems impossible. Many observers would regard this as a beneficial development.

I'm sure there's much more to be said that I haven't thought of. It's almost impossible to think of all the consequences of an untried idea.

*Anyway, good luck. I fear your idea is too far removed from current practice to attract much support, but it's worth discussing. Personally, I don't see any compelling reason to change our voting system. If Canada really is "the greatest country in the world," as our politicians love to say, *First Past the Post* can't be all that bad.*

It is worth noting that Prof. Flanagan came to a similar conclusion regarding electioneering that I did. On the larger issue of whether a constitutional amendment is needed I am inclined to say it doesn't matter. Federal election law falls completely within the realm of federal responsibility. As such only the House of Commons, Senate, and Crown need approve of it and these are the same bodies that would approve an ordinary law anyways.

Prof. Peter Loewen, Political Science Professor at the University of Toronto

I think this kind of thing has been proposed in some forms, but I think your conception of it [is] unique and interesting. The most interesting scenario I can imagine from this is that there would be a strange imbalance, where the party that won the most seats is regularly outvoted by the other parties. Imagine three parties: A, B, and C, who respectively receive 45%, 35% and 20% of the vote. Imagine their seat shares (realistically) are 55%, 35%, and 10%. In a 100 seat legislature, the 55 Party A members each have a vote worth $45/55 = .81$ seats. The 35 Party B members each have a vote worth 1 seat each. The Party C folks have votes worth 2 seats each. So, members of smaller parties actually become more powerful. This violates quite a few norms.

Where would we be if we didn't kill a sacred cow every now and then? The imbalance between seat totals and voting power mentioned above serves the purpose of giving the governing party as wide of range of talent to draw from while giving them no more ability to legislate than the popular vote says they deserve. The imbalance between individual MPs will be odd at first but doesn't effect the overall picture. Although smaller parties having a larger voice isn't a bad thing.

Specific Situations Addressed

While the basic idea behind SM-PV is very simple complexity can arise based on the extent votes become based on popular vote rather than seat totals. While it is possible to switch all decisions to a popular vote basis for various reasons this is not ideal. The proposal I have submitted assumes certain aspects of how the House of Commons runs will continue to be based on seat totals. I have outlined how certain situations *could* be handled under SM-PV.

Legislative vs. Procedural Votes

The primary aim of SM-PV is to lessen the ability of governments to unilaterally pass legislation with only a minority of voters behind them. As such I have taken a conservative approach to aspects of the House of Commons not directly related to passing legislation. I propose the two following guidelines:

- Votes on ordinary legislation will use the new MP voting system.
- Votes of a procedural nature or *explicit* confidence matters (budget, Speech from the Throne) will continue to be counted on the basis of seat totals.

Who Forms the Government & Why under SM-PV

Government formation would remain the prerogative of the Crown. The convention that the party with the most seats gets first shot at forming the government would likewise be preserved. In theory the convention could become that the party with the biggest share of the popular vote gets first shot at governing could be adopted. However, there is good reason not to adopt this new convention over the old one.

Governments should have a large number of potential cabinet ministers to choose from. Given the partisan nature of government formation this means keeping government formation based on the number of seats a party has. While the party with the largest share of the popular vote is also likely to have the greatest number of seats, this is not assured.

The Speaker & Seat Vacancies During a Sitting Parliament

The Speaker of the House of Commons is traditionally chosen at the start of a new Parliament by their peers. Continuing to base these decisions on one member-one vote is probably for the best. However, the position of the Speaker does raise an important question: How does the proposed system effect the Speaker's inability to vote and changes to the total number of MPs in between elections?

At present when the Speaker takes his seat and when vacancies occur during a term it throws off the seat percentage in relation to the popular vote. Under FPTP this doesn't matter as the two values are already out of whack. But under my system these two values are in direct relation. Now the differences created are small and could be ignored. But if you wanted to you could create the rule that the voting power of MPs is recalculated at the start of each day based on how many seats a party has in comparison to its popular vote. MP quits their seat? No problem.

Closing Thoughts

Changing an electoral system is an extremely important decision for any democracy as it has the potential to both improve or degrade democratic traditions. For this reason alone caution must remain the better part of valour in any reform initiative. The system proposed is one that I feel gives the greatest gain with the least amount of change from current practice. While the temptation to 'start fresh' is great we cannot allow such feelings to lock us into an electoral system completely alien to Canada.

There are those who will say that my system has the disadvantage of not having already been adopted by other countries. In reply I would like to ask a simple question: To what degree are the examples of other countries an accurate representation of what would happen in Canada? Countries have diverse histories, regional circumstances, political cultures, and constitutional set-ups. Ranked Ballot may work in some countries. Proportional Representation may fix some issues where it has been adopted. But in either case those other countries do not have the unique circumstances Canada does. Single Member-Proportional Vote should be weighed on the basis of its potential benefits, not its lack of adoption by other countries.

There remains two of Minister Maryam Monsef's Eight Principles for Electoral Reform that I have not addressed:

- Reform should increase diversity in the House of Commons.
- Electoral system must inspire Canadians to find common ground & consensus.

The first principle is not one that I feel should (or can) be fixed simply by switching electoral systems. I feel it is an issue that political parties are in a position to address and **should** address. For the second principle I am going to come back to SM-PV's ability to fix *wasted votes* and *strategic voting*. With both fixed the Liberals & NDP can tone down their bickering over who represents 'true' progressivism. With votes mattering even in regions of the country where winning is hopeless for a specific party the urge to play one region against another is lessened since it will hurt the party trying to divide Canadians more than it will help them. A party might not be able to win in the West or East but trying to turn one against the other would be foolish (unlike the current system where it can be effective). Successful parties under SM-PV will be those who can craft truly inclusive national visions.

I have already stated the advantages of SM-PV repeatedly so I will avoid further redundancy. Instead I will ask you to consider its flaws. It may seem odd to ask you to do this as I am advocating that you adopt this electoral system as the Committee's recommendation to Parliament. However, all electoral systems have flaws. I am confident that when you measure the flaws of my proposed system with those of the other ones proposed SM-PV will come out on top.

In conclusion I will wish you all good health as you continue with the weighty task that has been given to you.

With Best Regards,
James Wilson