

# Counting Votes: Essays on Electoral Reform

*edited by Lydia Miljan*

On June 7, 2016, the government formed the Parliamentary Committee on Electoral Reform, as part of the Liberal government's campaign promise that 2015 would be the last election held under first-past-the-post (FPTP). The committee's task is to deliver alternatives to our current electoral system by December 1, 2016.

---

This volume takes a look at the issue of electoral reform without pre-judging any one system over another. John Pepall starts off with his chapter, "First-Past-the-Post: Empowered Voters, Accountable Government." His sober examination of why voting matters and the consequences of choosing an electoral system should give Canadians reason to pause and consider why we might want to engage in this process. At its core, Pepall argues that changing the system may affect the outcome of elections, but it can't negate the fact that in a multi-party pluralistic system, there will be winners and losers. In the end, there is a greater chance of minority and coalition governments as compared to FPTP.

Some have argued that minority and coalition governments are harmless; indeed, they often make the case that these types of government create more cooperation and collegiality. Jason Clemens and his co-authors address this issue in their chapter, "Electoral Rules and Fiscal Policy Outcomes." Their analysis focuses on proportional representation electoral systems and that system's propensity to incur higher levels of government spending and deficits than majority/

plurality systems. The experience from major Western democracies is that systems with proportional representation tend to have more political parties than those with FPTP. The increase in the number of parties is directly related to an increase in coalition governments and it is through an increased incidence of coalition governments that PR leads to higher levels of government spending and deficits.

While proportional representation has more of a propensity to increase government spending as a percentage of GDP than our current system, what about other electoral systems, such as the alternative vote?

In their chapter, "The Consequences of the Alternative Vote," Lydia Miljan and Taylor Jackson examine poll data from the 1997 to 2015 elections to see if the outcome would be any different under an AV system than under FPTP. The study found that the Liberals were the only party to benefit in all cases under AV electoral rules, although the NDP did experience large gains under AV in more recent elections. Moreover, the study also suggests that in the last 23 years, an AV

system could have changed the outcomes of the 2004, 2006, and 2011 elections.

While the current government’s five guiding principles are laudable, one of the most glaring omissions in those principles is that they place no value on there being a change in the governing party. A central tenet of electoral success is that there is a fair opportunity for other political parties to have a realistic chance at changing the current regime. This is crucial for the renewal of countries to ensure that they have policy changes. The AV system fails to address any of the five values the government seeks to address in its electoral reform initiative, and, in fact, it would create a new problem: our future elections would be less competitive.



*... systems with proportional representation tend to have more political parties than those with FPTP. The increase in the number of parties is directly related to an increase in coalition governments and it is through an increased incidence of coalition governments that PR leads to higher levels of government spending and deficits.*



This leads to the question of the role the public should have in the electoral reform process. Patrice Dutil, in his chapter, “The Imperative of a Referendum,” argues that there is a constitutional convention that a referendum should be held on electoral reform. He points out that when the provincial governments of Prince Edward Island (2005), British Columbia (2005 and 2009), and Ontario (2007) sought to change their electoral systems, they each consulted the public through a referendum. Dutil points out that the Supreme Court has laid out a series of questions to test the validity of a convention. The so-called “Jennings Test” provides three conditions

that have to be met in order for there to be a constitutional convention. Dutil makes the case that all three are satisfied in the issue of a referendum on electoral reform.

While the government seeks to increase voter engagement and attain more representatives from minority groups, it is becoming clear that changing the electoral system may not achieve any of those goals.

There is no perfect electoral system. Each system has its own benefits and drawbacks. The issue facing the parliamentary committee is whether a new electoral system can change for the better the political culture of a country that has enjoyed free and fair elections for the past 150 years.



Counting Votes: Essays on Electoral Reform

edited by Lydia Miljan

[Click here to read the full report](#)

