

# First-Past-the-Post: Empowered Voters, Accountable Government

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## Introduction

In its election platform, and again in its December 2015 Speech from the Throne, the federal Liberal government committed itself “to ensuring that 2015 will be the last federal election conducted under the first-past-the-post voting system.” The implication is that our present way of voting, more technically and politely called single member plurality voting (SMPV) is deeply flawed.<sup>2</sup> The government does not address what the flaws of first-

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<sup>2</sup> While single member plurality voting is technically the more correct term for this form of voting, for the sake of clarity and consistency with the other papers in this book, we will be using the more widely used “first-past-the-post” (FPTP).

past-the-post (FPTP) are and how another way of voting could overcome them.

There is to be a “national engagement process” to decide on electoral reforms, but the argument that FPTP is the best way of electing a Parliament has been pre-emptively excluded from the discussions. As FPTP is the best way of electing a Parliament, this is unfortunate.

For reformers it is obvious that FPTP is bad. But, if they are right, the result of practically every election in our history was wrong and most people don't seem to care. Reformers are heartened by polls that show majority support for reform, but in referendums voters have repeatedly rejected specific reforms. Most people don't seem to care about what, for reformers, must be the most important issue in politics. While reformers think the case for reform is obvious, some also think that the issue is too complicated to be addressed in a referendum. Of the people who tell pollsters that they favour reform, what they want from elections is what we get now and would not get from any reform.

Electoral reform can get very complicated. But the complications are the fault of the reformers, who do not understand the purpose of voting and who are trying to do the impossible.

Whatever the government may be thinking, once Pandora's Box has been opened, there is no telling where the discussion will go. The NDP is one party that knows what it wants. Others will weigh in. All likely options must be considered—and rejected.

## **Decisions, pluralities, and preferences**

At the root of all arguments for electoral reform is the complaint that candidates can win seats and parties form governments with only a plurality of the votes.

“Majority rule” is widely understood as the basis of democracy. It is obvious that when there are more than two choices, there may be no majority for any of them. It is not as obvious, but just as true, that there is no way of

contriving a majority by adopting some other way of voting from the one that occurred naturally to people when they first decided things by voting.

Voting is a way of making decisions. When a group of people is having difficulty deciding what to do, someone is likely to say, “Let’s put it to a vote.” That usually means a yes or a no and a majority decides.

But if friends trying to decide between three restaurants to go to found there was no majority for one, they might be tempted to list their preferences, and after eliminating the one that got the lowest preferences think they had found a majority when there previously hadn’t been one.

Like many people keen on electoral reform, they haven’t heard of the “paradox of voting.” It can be illustrated simply in an example when three voters [1, 2, and 3] have to choose between three options or candidates [A, B, and C] by a preferential ballot:

1	2	3
A	B	C
B	C	A
C	A	B

What do we find? A majority (1 and 3) prefer A to B. A majority (1 and 2) prefer B to C. So we can eliminate C and have a runoff between A and B? No. Because a majority (2 and 3) prefer C to A.

If an individual said he preferred A to B, and B to C, and C to A, we would say that he could not make up his mind. But this paradox lurks in all voting where there are more than two choices, in all the schemes intended to improve our elections. There is no problem when there are only two choices: A majority will select one, and that majority will be accepted. But where there are more than two choices, electoral schemes that appear to produce a majority by a process of elimination ignore the paradox of voting.

It gets worse. Proponents of electoral reform may say, “What does it matter? There is a result and surely it is better than someone getting elected with only 30% of the votes.” But preferential voting’s orderliness conceals a fatal flaw. It can breach monotonicity, the core principle that a candidate should be better off she gets more votes. This is not, as it surely should be, necessarily so.

Suppose there are three candidates and 21 voters with the following preferences:

	<u>1st</u>	<u>2nd</u>	<u>3rd</u>
7	A	B	C
3	B	A	C
5	B	C	A
6	C	A	B

On first preferences, B gets 8 votes, A gets 7, and C 6. With the lowest number of votes, C is eliminated. Because of the number of those who had C as their first preference and had A as their second, on the second count, A wins:

13	A
8	B

Suppose the three voters whose preference was B A C had switched to A B C:

	<u>1st</u>	<u>2nd</u>	<u>3rd</u>
7	A	B	C
3	A	B	C
5	B	C	A
6	C	A	B

Now B has the lowest number of votes on the first count and is eliminated. Because the B voters' second choice is C, on the second count A loses and C wins:

10	A
11	C

More votes for A, and no more votes for C, has nonetheless led to A losing and C winning. It can also happen that a shift of votes between two candidates makes no difference to them but may cause one or more other candidates, whose votes remain the same, to win or lose.

In 1951, the economist Kenneth Arrow published his General Impossibility Theorem, which proved that “there is no method of voting which will remove the paradox of voting... no matter how complicated” (Arrow, 1951: 59). It was cited as a basis for his Nobel Prize. The paradox of voting and the breach of monotonicity from preferential voting do not mean that voting is pointless. They only point the way to understanding voting and making it work to enable voters to decide.

One complaint made against FPTP is that it may force people to vote “tactically,” in other words, voters may not vote for the candidate they “sincerely” want to win, but for another with a better chance of winning. Reformers claim that in a different system than FPTP, voters will be able to vote “sincerely,” not worrying that their votes may let in someone they are against on a plurality. But with preferential voting, voters cannot even know whether their vote will help or hinder their candidate.

And while many voters may have preferences running down through three or more choices in an election, many may not. They are for one candidate or party and don’t like any of the others. Reformers like to complain that 69% of voters voted against a candidate who wins with 31% of the votes. But the 69% did not vote *against* the winner. They voted *for* someone else. If voting against the winner was their intention, they could have coalesced around the runner-up. Those who advocate preferential voting implicitly concede that under plurality voting voters cannot be presumed to vote against anyone.

Media reports suggest that the government leans to preferential voting as the alternative to FPTP (Clark, 2015, August 7). Analysis shows that had preferential voting been in place in Canada, based on the voting patterns in the October 19, 2015 election, an even greater Liberal majority might have been produced than the one the Liberals won then (Jansen, 2015). The insinuation is that the electoral reform commitment was just a Liberal scheme to ensure it receives big majorities in perpetuity.

But it is a mistake to assume the outcome of any electoral reform based on existing voting patterns. Faced with a different ballot, voters may vote differently. And, in any event, voting patterns and party standings will evolve as issues, interests, and ideas change over time. Whatever political

strategists may calculate, or disinterested commentators speculate as to the advantages or disadvantages of preferential voting in particular circumstances, those calculations have to be judged based on abstractions from existing voting patterns.

Preferential voting attempts the impossible: making a majority where there is only a plurality. Its proponents claim it is simple. All you have to do is mark 1, 2, 3.... But, if filling out a preferential ballot is only a little more complicated than voting as we do now, what happens to the preferences when they are counted is beyond the understanding of voters.

The long term consequences of adopting preferential voting in Canada are unforeseeable. It might well, for some time, entrench in power a “natural governing party.” Or, with party splits, new parties emerging, regional tensions, and the evolution of ideas, interests, and personal rivalries, lead to fragmentation that is beyond voters’ ability to control.

Preferential voting in Australia may offer a lesson. For generations and for all intents and purposes, Australia had a two-party system that alternated in government: the Labour Party and the conservatives. The latter was made up of a permanent coalition between the Liberal and National parties. Preferential voting allowed the parties in the coalition to sort things out between themselves. Late in the last century things began to fall apart. Independents and fringe parties took seats and sometimes held an unstable balance of power.

Where there is no majority, a plurality is just as valid a basis for a group decision as a majority. It is the most popular, it is transparent, both voters and candidates can see how it works and govern themselves accordingly, and it is a decision. Some may be unhappy with the result. But so may 49.99% when a majority decides.

## **Proportional representation**

While preferential voting claims to solve the alleged problem of the MP for Maple River being elected with only 31% of the votes, it does nothing to produce proportional representation (PR) of parties, to solve another

alleged problem—that of the Liberals winning a majority (over 54% of the seats in the House of Commons in the most recent federal election) with under 40% of the votes.

That FPTP does not produce proportional representation of parties is obvious, though advocates of PR never tire of giving examples of its failure to do so. The question of why we should want proportional representation of parties is never addressed. It is assumed that we should, that PR is “fair.”

To understand PR, and why it is bad, we need to ask what parties are for.

Parties are a paradox. The root of the word “party” means division. But parties serve a necessary purpose—not by dividing people, but by bringing them together.

Parliament had a long history before there were parties. MPs in England’s House of Commons in the 16th century may have seen things differently depending on whether they represented London, or a town, or country seat. But there were no parties.

It was only with the coming of what is now known as “responsible government” in the early 18th century that parties finally emerged. As responsibility for government came to be assumed by a ministry drawn from Parliament and supported by the House of Commons, it became necessary to organize that support and seek its continuance in elections. Nothing at all like modern party organization emerged until well into the 19th century. But in Parliament, and at elections, parties finally emerged as the purpose for which they exist emerged.

A party exists to form a government. It is a political association of people whose interests and ideas and confidence in each other make it possible that they should be able to work together to support coherent measures, a ministry, and, most important, a budget. No party has any value in politics unless it is a potential government.

A party exists to form a government. This is not a dogma. It is an historic fact. If it is not true, what is a party for? It is not enough to say that it exists to promote interests or ideas. There are all kinds of associations that promote the interests and ideas that are the stuff of politics. But to be a political party an association must put up candidates selected by its own rules and run some kind of campaign on their behalf. Any association that

does that assumes a responsibility for all that governments may do, even if the protection of the environment or the independence of Quebec or farmers' interests are what brought them into politics, and even if their position on everything else is indifference or that nothing should be done. That is a position in itself and the one-issue or one-interest party will have to contend not only with those who don't care so much about farming or whatever, but with those who insist that other issues have to be addressed and other interests weighed. MPs are called upon to deal with all our public business. They cannot choose to deal with only some of it. Nor can voters in choosing an MP limit themselves to some issues and interests. The government they elect cannot and will not.

Under PR small parties with no ambition to form a government by themselves win seats and often join coalition governments. So they may claim they advance the ideas and interests they stand for. But what is really happening? Either their ideas and interests are supported by most voters, in which case they should not be small parties but big parties, or their ideas and interests are shared with other parties and their claim to be the sole champion of those ideas is false. Conversely, their ideas and interests are supported only by their 10% of the voters and they lever their 10% of Parliament to impose those ideas against the wishes of most voters. Or they abandon their ideas to take places in government and so betray their supporters. The only basis on which small parties can claim to advance their interests and ideas without accepting the challenge of getting a plurality of votes is by seeking disproportionate power in a fragmented Parliament. Hence the fondness of small parties for PR.

### ***Waste***

A favourite claim of PR's advocates is that votes in our elections for losing candidates and excess votes for winning candidates are "wasted." Most of those votes are cast by voters who know that their candidate is either sure to win or sure to lose, but in the face of all the carping, voters in their millions cast their votes anyway. They see the point of doing so even when the advocates of PR refuse to. Advocates of PR could not come up with the fig-



ures showing what they claim are wasted votes, if voters were not so keen, as they see it, to waste their votes.

The concept of the wasted vote is an artefact of PR doctrine. You could say you wasted your vote if you did not vote, in the same way as if you had a ticket to a ball game and did not go you would say you wasted your ticket. Or you could say you wasted your vote if you spoilt your ballot. But to say you have wasted your vote if your vote does not count, in however minuscule a degree, towards a party winning a seat, amounts to saying that your vote is wasted if it does not produce a winner. Under proportional representation, in Canada every vote would count for 0.00002 seats. But the price of this tiny victory would be loss of control over government. It is only when you accept the proportional representation argument that every vote must count towards seats that the phrase “wasted vote” takes on meaning. When you vote for Jones for mayor, and Singh wins, or Jones wins by a landslide, you do not think you wasted your vote.

Voting is a procedure for letting the people decide. If they are not unanimous, any decision must involve one choice winning and one or more losing. The PR goal that “everyone wins and all get prizes” means that the voters do not decide. That is a real waste of voting.

### ***Two schemes***

The simple and logical way to achieve PR is for voters to vote for a party list of candidates in order from 1 to whatever number of seats are open. If a party gets 10% of the vote, enough candidates at the top of the list to fill 10% of the seats would be elected. In Canada there would probably have to be separate lists for each province and territory to comply with the Constitution, producing ragged results across the country. The Territories, with one seat each, would still have first-past-the-post.

Simple party list PR has never been strongly promoted in Canada, perhaps because, despite their willingness to endorse the principle of PR in polls, voters are leery of parties, and reformers realize that asking voters simply to vote for a party would not be popular.

Two elaborate alternative schemes were put to voters in three provinces early this century and roundly rejected. Each illustrates the folly of trying to do better than best.

### **Single Transferable Vote (STV)**

The Single Transferable Vote was proposed by the British Columbia Citizen's Assembly in 2004. It came closer than any other electoral reform initiative to being adopted in Canada. It is seductive in its elaborateness. The very highest claims have been made for it. Keen proponents of electoral reform have called STV a cult (Sykes, 1990: xii).

It works like this: Ridings would elect more than one member. We shall use the hypothetical riding of Fraser as an example. In that riding, three members are to be elected. Voters would be asked to mark the order in which they prefer the candidates on their ballot. The number of ballots is divided by the number of members to be elected plus one. The next full number above that is the "Droop quota," the number of votes needed to elect a member. So if there are 10,000 ballots, a candidate needs 2,501 votes to be elected.

If a candidate gets 2,501 or more first preference votes he is declared elected. If he gets more than 2,501 first preference votes--say 3,000--then a transfer value is calculated for the second preferences on the ballots on which he was the first preference by dividing the surplus votes by his total number of first preferences. So these second preferences are transferred at a value of  $499/3000$ .

If no candidate gets 2,501 votes, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and the second preferences on the ballots on which she was the first preference are counted. The process of transferring votes goes on until three candidates have got 2,501 votes and are declared elected. Votes for eliminated candidates can be transferred several times at full value if they do not land with a winning candidate and surplus votes for winning candidates can be transferred at ever smaller fractions. The elaborate arithmetic of the single transferable vote encourages the hope that it makes every vote

count even when all but a handful of experts have lost track of what is happening to the votes.

Why are there to be three members elected in the riding of Fraser? STV needs multi-member ridings because it is designed to allow the election of members by a small percentage of votes. The bigger the riding, the smaller the Droop quota and the percentage of votes needed to elect a member. While the percentage of voters needed to elect a member declines, the number of members elected to represent voters who do not support them, even vehemently oppose them, rises.

The riding of Fraser elects three members, but an individual voter is only, at best, electing one. Once a voter's preferences have "counted" towards the election of one member, they are cast aside. Any other member elected in the riding no more represents that voter than the member for Peterborough represents a voter in Medicine Hat. It is not a question of whether the voter likes or would have voted for that other member. He could not, no more than a voter in Peterborough can vote for the member for Medicine Hat. He may have placed the other member somewhere on his list of preferences, but that preference would not have been counted.

All the candidates' names are on the ballot, but the voter does not get to choose three candidates to fill the three seats. If the first preference candidate, the one with the real vote, is elected, the ballot may be cast aside. Conversely, it is possible to fill in all preferences so that literally the last person you would want elected wins your vote.

STV appears to seek the voter's will in exhaustive detail, but in actual fact it restricts the voter's say to what STV deems a "fair share." STV may appear to ask which three candidates you would like to see elected, but it is really only asking which one of them you want.

STV is strongly sold as a means of achieving proportional representation, but claims to offer the best of both worlds by asking voters to choose between individuals. Independents with no party affiliation can be elected. In fact what it really does is allow the election of members who have secured only a small fraction of the vote. In a riding with six members, just over 14% of the vote would be enough for each one to be elected. In our present elections, some voters complain that members are elected with as

little as 30% of the vote. If that is the case now, how can a member who got less than 15% of the vote speak for her riding?

While barring the voter from effectively choosing all the members who are to represent her, STV asks for a range of choices that is unrealistic. A preference of the Liberal voter between the New Democrats and the Conservatives and then between the individual New Democrat and Conservative candidates may be expressed but cannot be serious. It may be mischievous. Voters evidently have some difficulty deciding how to cast a single vote. Their choice of multiple preferences of decreasing value must become meaningless. A preferential ballot asks for far more choice than voters can seriously make. And any vote may become a vote for a candidate at full value.

STV's elaborateness suggests that it captures the voter's will with great precision, but it can only do so if the voter's will is precisely cut to STV's theory. Take, as an example, voting in a three-member riding. Mary lists the three Suede Party candidates: 1, 2, and 3. STV registers a preference in that order. Very likely Mary has no preference between them—at least none between 1 and 2, or 2 and 3. The preference STV registers is an artefact. But it may be enough to elect 1 before the preferences of others who strongly prefer 2 over 1 come into play. Mary did not mean to give 1 an advantage over 2, but she did. Or 3 may be the one Suede candidate with a chance, but be eliminated before Mary's 3rd preference is counted. As the counting goes on, things become even trickier. Mary votes "sincerely," as STV wants her to do, that she prefers 4 to all the others left in the race. But when Mary's 4th preference is counted, the real contest is between her 6th and 7th choices, and the 7th is elected while 4 is eliminated.

STV claims by its contrivance and mathematics more effectively to express the will of the voters than any other system. In the end, all that can be said is that STV produces the result that STV produces.

STV is a form of preferential voting. As explained above, preferential voting breaches monotonicity. Candidates can win or lose because they got fewer votes or more votes, or some other candidate got more votes or fewer votes. Voters haven't a clue what the consequences of their prefer-

ences may be, though apparently in Australia fringe parties have worked out ways of gaming the system to get senators elected on .5% of the vote.

Given that it can be shown that STV gets the will of the voters wrong and that more votes can lose a candidate an election, STV's claims are demonstrably false.

### **Mixed member proportional voting (MMP)**

The proposal before Ontario voters in October 2007, and PEI voters in November 2005, and favoured by the NDP, was so-called Mixed Member Proportional voting (MMP). It is used most notably in Germany, but also in New Zealand since 1996. As proposed for Ontario, it would have worked like this: 90 members of the provincial Parliament would have been elected in the old-fashioned way in single member constituencies. A further 39 members would have been elected from party lists on the basis of proportional representation. Many may think that this is a kind of compromise, with 39 of 129 members being elected through proportional representation—not even half PR. Proponents of the scheme are content that they think that. But under MMP, the list seats are not assigned in proportion to party votes. They are used to see that, as far as is mathematically possible, each party gets seats in proportion to its party vote. So assume there is a party none of whose candidates won one of the constituency seats, but which got 10% of the party vote. It would get 10% of the seats. Conversely, assume there is party that received 45% of the constituency vote and got 45% or more of all the seats, easy enough to achieve as we are continually reminded by PR's fans. It would get none of the list seats. The list seats would not “introduce an element of proportionality,” in the phrase used by the Law Commission's report on electoral reform from 2004; those list seats would impose proportional representation.

The 2007 report of the Ontario Citizens' Assembly had as its title One Ballot, Two Votes, ostensibly offering the promise of more choice. But the voter does not get more choice. Each ballot asks for a vote for a constituency candidate and a vote for a party. But the voter who votes for a win-

ning candidate effectively cancels her second party list vote. Only the voter whose constituency vote is, in the theory of proportional representation “wasted,” can cast an effective list vote.

The only “mixed” element in MMP is the retention of single-member constituencies. MMP’s proponents assure us that we should still have our local member for a riding only a bit larger than it is now. Half or fewer of the members would come from party lists and not represent a riding. While the retention of local members is a good thing, so far as it goes, even local members under MMP would necessarily be more party creatures, as their local success or failure would redound on the party list.

The belief that retaining local members while rigorously imposing PR strikes a good balance results from an overly abstract analysis of voting in which our vote is broken down into a vote for a local representative and a vote for a government, a vote for a person and a vote for a party. When we vote now we are not torn as academics suppose between these two or any other factors. We weigh them and much more in making a decision. Is Smith in favour of gun control, lower taxes, bombing ISIS, a good speaker but an indifferent servant of the constituents, famously accomplished but a stranger to the riding?

We cannot split our votes for each consideration: a vote for someone to speak in the House, a vote for someone to serve the constituents, a vote on this issue and that. It is not simply impractical but wrong, because, whatever the considerations of policy and principle, ability and character we may weigh, we are voting for a human being to represent us. And that human being will be called upon to do all that a member may do, and to address all the issues that may arise.

Though independents can be elected in the constituency seats under MMP, most constituency members are elected for a party, and the party is the prime consideration in voters’ minds. But supporting a party in an election now means hoping that it will form a government. Under MMP there would be little hope of one party forming a government.

MMP would produce two classes of MP. Constituency members would have their constituency duties with the work and hope of local strength

that they offer. List members would be free of local duties but indentured party servants.

Advocates of MMP tout this system as offering more choice. But as we have seen, this is not true for the voter who votes for X party's candidate in a riding and X party's list. MMP's advocates proclaim that one can split one's vote: vote for X party's candidate and Y party's list. But why would one want to do that? Suppose Lee is the candidate of the X party. You vote for Lee because you think Lee is bright, honest, hard-working, and so on. If Lee were running for the Y or Z party, you would still vote for Lee. As people used to say, you "vote the man, not the party." If that is how you see things, then party cannot mean much to you, and your party vote cannot mean much to you either.

MMP fans think of splitting your vote as being broadminded, being not bound to a party. But as proportional representation, which is what MMP is, is designed entirely to serve parties and entrench them, its advocates cannot claim indifference to party.

If you decide to split your vote, the likelihood is that you have figured out how MMP really works and know your list vote may not count because your party already has as many seats as it is allowed under PR. So you vote "tactically" for the party most likely to ally itself with your real party choice. A risky vote, as post-election alliances can be unpredictable. Ideally, you could vote to elect a candidate of one party in your riding and support the list of another party that would agree on everything with your riding candidate's party.

Thus is born the idea of a decoy party. Suppose there is a 200-seat house with 100 seats filled by riding candidates and 100 from party lists. There is a Tory Party and a Conservative Party. Tories run in the ridings but not Conservatives. With 35% of the vote, the Tories elect 45 members in the ridings. There is no Tory list for the party vote but there is a Conservative list. It gets 35% of the vote and 70 list seats. The Tory/Conservatives have elected 115 members, 57.5%, with 35% of the vote. Hard to do even with our present way of voting.

Blatant decoy parties could be banned by legislation. But the possibility of decoy parties shows a fundamental flaw in MMP. The two votes on one

ballot are only useful or effective if there is something like a decoy party available. In practice, parties can become effective decoys without being so bold in their planning that they will be caught by legislation. In Germany, the Free Democrats operated as a decoy for the Christian Democrats. The differences between them on policy were no greater than differences within the Christian Democrats and the relations between their politicians as cordial or bitter as those amongst Christian Democrats. In election after election, Christian Democrat voters having elected a constituency member gave their list vote to the Free Democrats, accounting for roughly half their votes.

The decoy problem is peculiar to MMP, but typical of the problems that arise with every contrivance to do better than the system we have now. Every complication intended to right imagined wrongs produces real wrongs.

Making the sorry best of MMP depends on a thorough grasp of how it works and a knowledge of what one's fellow voters will do that few polls can give. There is every reason to believe that many people will not understand how it works and what they should do. Surveys done in Scotland after MMP was adopted for elections to the Scottish Parliament showed woeful incomprehension. Under the slogan "Second vote Green" the Scottish Greens played on this, encouraging voters to see the list vote as a second preference, when, of course, for the overall result the list vote rules (Commission on Boundary Differences and Voting Systems ["Arbuthnott Commission"], 2006: 31, paras 412 et seq.; see also Herbert, Burnside, Earle, Edwards, Foley, and Mciver, 2007: 42 and 46).<sup>3</sup>

Voters under MMP will fall into two groups. The majority, probably, who don't understand how it works, and the rest looking for a decoy.

MMP has all the faults of proportional representation. What distinguishes it (the retention of locally elected members), serves only to ob-

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<sup>3</sup> The Arbuthnott Commission said, perhaps rightly, that the Greens were not to be blamed for campaigning to seek their best advantage from the voting system. But the system must be blamed if the Greens got half or more of their seats from voters who did not understand the consequences of their second vote, as appears to have happened. A change in the form of the ballot paper and voters understanding the system better perhaps led to the Greens falling from seven seats in 2003 to two in 2007.



score its faults and compound them by confusing voters or opening the way to decoy voting by the astute.

### **If deciding is taken away from voters**

What coalitions are formed after an election under PR or preferential voting, and how parties to a coalition work together, are beyond the control and even the understanding of voters. Coalitions themselves are the product of an attempt to make a majority where there is none and a decision where there has been none. Social choice and game theory might be invoked to explain what happens, but even the participants do not understand what happens. Voters may think that voting Green will make a greener government, or voting Conservative will make a more conservative government, but they may be wrong.

Electoral reformers idealize coalitions as benign compromise while complaining of the tendency of parties under plurality voting, or first-past-the-post, to seek the effective centre. Under plurality voting, parties seek the most votes by offering a program with the widest appeal and stand or fall on it. Under proportional representation, parties offer a program for a niche with no way of knowing, or assuring voters, that they can be effective.

The failure of elections under proportional representation to produce decisions leads to unstable or stagnant governments and can shift power from the politicians and those who choose them to the bureaucracy. We need no Marx, or Djilas (author of *The New Class*), to see that bureaucracy is a class with its own interests in big government and control. If voters want that, they can have it—as they have in many countries without proportional representation. However, the entrenchment in power of what is, from one perspective, an interest group, without strong direction and control by politicians and voters, must always threaten freedom and accountability.

It is the ability to “throw the bums out,” more even than the ability to choose a new government, that is the most striking practical virtue of FPTP. Our governments are responsible, must answer to the voters, and

are regularly defeated. Joseph Schumpeter (1987: 272) and Karl Popper (1963 and 1988, April 23) saw the ability to get rid of an unsatisfactory government as the purpose and test of democracy and condemned proportional representation for not seeing this. To “throw the bums out” is almost impossible with proportional representation. In the 50 years after 1945 in 103 elections in Belgium, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland, the major governing party was only thrown from office six times (Pinto-Duschinsky, 1998, September 25). Major parties have remained in government for decades under proportional representation despite wide fluctuations in their votes. Minor parties often seem to share in government in inverse proportion to their electoral success, turfed out when their vote grows and they look threatening, and brought in when it sags.

## Conclusion

That plurality voting is old is nothing against it. It is still the most widely used way of voting. The plethora of alternatives, only touched on in this paper, shows that no better way has been found, though the alternatives were contrived and tried from the 19th century and have served the interests of a political class, generally state subsidized.

First-past-the-post is the only way of voting that assures effective and accountable government. We abandon it at our peril.

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