

**THE SINGLE-MEMBER PLURALITY AND MIXED-MEMBER
PROPORTIONAL ELECTORAL SYSTEMS :
Different Concepts of an Election**

by

James C. Anderson

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ABSTRACT

The thesis is an analysis of the different concepts of an election reflected in the single-member plurality (SMP) electoral system and the mixed-member proportional (MMP) electoral system. These different concepts reflect the views held by proponents of the respective electoral systems about what an election is to accomplish and what an electoral system is to provide. Attention is paid to whether the concept of an election recognizes the “new reality” that is introduced. Such intentions embedded in the concept contribute to whether the respective electoral system successfully achieves the most important criteria which will be emphasized for measuring a “good” electoral system. It is argued in the thesis that, as a result of its wider and more modern concept of an election – to be explained – which focuses more on aggregate vote totals, the mixed-member proportional system better achieves the criteria which underpin a “good” electoral system.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
<i>INTRODUCTION</i>	1
<i>CHAPTER ONE :</i>	
<i>CRITERIA FOR A “GOOD” ELECTORAL SYSTEM</i>	9
Criterion #1 – Fair and Accurate Conversion of Votes into Seats	12
Criterion #2 – Minimizing “Wasted” Votes	15
Criterion #3 – Minimizing Compromised Voting	17
Other Criteria for a “Good” Electoral System	21
Democratic Values Criteria Desired to be Reflected in an Electoral System	25
Conclusion	30
<i>CHAPTER TWO :</i>	
<i>SHORTCOMINGS OF THE SMP ELECTORAL SYSTEM</i>	32
Criterion #1 – Fair and Accurate Conversion of Votes into Seats	32
Criterion #2 – Minimizing “Wasted” Votes	34
Criterion #3 – Minimizing Compromised Voting	35
SMP and Other Criteria for a “Good” Electoral System	37
SMP as a “Good” Electoral System	48
“What is wrong with this picture?”	50
<i>CHAPTER THREE :</i>	
<i>A NEW CONCEPT OF AN ELECTION</i>	52
Alternative Features and Concepts of an Election	52
Debating Alternative Concepts of an Election in Parliament	58
SMP and Changed Political Realities	64
<i>CHAPTER FOUR :</i>	
<i>THE MMP ELECTORAL SYSTEM AND THE CRITERIA</i>	71
Criterion #1 – Proportionality	72
Criterion #2 – Effective Votes	73
Criterion #3 – Minimizing Compromised Voting	74
Secondary Criteria	76

TABLE OF CONTENTS (continued)

CHAPTER FIVE :	
OUTCOMES FROM CHANGING	
TO A MIXED-MEMBER PROPORTIONAL ELECTORAL SYSTEM	77
Positive Outcomes From a Change to MMP	79
Negative Outcomes From a Change to MMP	95
Final Diagnosis of Outcomes	112
CHAPTER SIX :	
CONCLUSION	115
APPENDIX :	
BARRIERS TO ELECTORAL REFORM	125
The Possibility of Overcoming Barriers Towards Electoral Reform	134
BIBLIOGRAPHY :	142

INTRODUCTION

John Courtney's 2004 book, *Elections*, skillfully examines what he calls "the five pillars or building blocks of democratic elections in Canada."¹ While "four of the five components (the franchise, electoral districting, voter registration, and election management) have changed immeasurably from the time of Confederation," the plurality system of voting has remained unchanged. As Courtney demonstrates, like many others, electoral reform has returned to the Canadian political agenda with the single-member plurality (SMP), or "first-past-the-post" (FPTP), system as the primary focus. Whether electoral reform is actually achieved in Canada, the debate over the merits of various alternatives is significant because the status quo and the alternatives mask a noteworthy – yet under-appreciated – conceptual divergence that lies at the very heart of electoral reform proposals. In a phrase, and in providing the approach to the thesis question, the single-member plurality and mixed-member proportional (MMP) electoral systems assume different concepts of an election.

In this thesis, these different concepts of an election reflected by the two respective systems and the leading criteria for evaluating an electoral system are analyzed. The parameters of the discussion question are confined to the SMP and MMP systems. The thesis does not, as its principal goal, seek to prove which electoral system is best. Rather, it sets out to diagnose and explain the substantial impact that this difference in the concept of an election has on each electoral system. Such an impact does have particular

¹ John C. Courtney, *Elections*, (Vancouver : UBC Press, 2004), xv.

pertinence regarding the ability or failure of the electoral system to meet the criteria which are laid out.

The first thesis chapter evaluates and ranks the criteria for an effective electoral system. What are deemed to be the three most important criteria for an electoral system – the leading assumptions which should play a paramount role in a “good” electoral system – are explained. These are the criteria which, in later chapters, are central in measuring both the SMP and MMP systems. Such factors contribute to the recognition and assessment of whether a fundamental problem exists. The leading criteria are aspects which are now increasingly expected from an electoral system. The general concept of what elections are intended to accomplish, and the principles underpinning what an electoral system is expected to provide, have changed considerably over time. The thesis strives to spell out which criteria are the most important for a “good” electoral system, and to justify why the other factors are not as vital. A specific section within the chapter provides a rationale for the ranking of these measures. The ultimate reason why the thesis argues that the three leading criteria are more important than the others relates to the assumptions about what an election is to achieve and what an electoral system is to accomplish that are implicit in the two voting systems. Such significant factors must not be overlooked in the concept, especially when one considers their potential positive impact on the electoral system. Through diagnosing which criteria are the most important, such recognition can eventually lead to useful progress in trying to achieve those criteria. The chapter also highlights what a number of recent reports see as being the key criteria for a “good” electoral system. Since the various commission reports make conflicting recommendations

(because they desire to achieve certain competing intentions), these real world examples illustrate the existence of the different concepts of an election that are introduced in the third chapter.

In the second chapter, the criteria for a “good” electoral system are applied first to the current single-member plurality system. The chapter identifies and explains whether there exist fundamental problems which result from the way proponents of the single-member plurality, or “first-past-the-post,” electoral system perceive an election and evaluates the success of SMP in meeting the criteria for a “good” electoral system. It asks if anything is wrong with this picture that has been presented.

The third chapter illustrates the significant features of both the current single-member plurality and the mixed-member proportional systems and explains the different ways in which the proponents of the respective electoral systems conceptualize an election. These visions for an electoral system are depicted for both the SMP and MMP systems. The reasons will be explained why the respective electoral system is or is not able to meet the different criteria as a result of its particular concept of an election reflected. Key criteria may be largely unattainable under an electoral system if such factors were not intended, or not yet thought of, in its structure and development – something which is principally based on the concept of an election assumed. The chapter also sets out to demonstrate both that there exists a new way of thinking about an election – a “new concept” – as well as to explain how this has occurred plus the reasons why such a new reality has in fact arisen in Canada. Furthermore, it explains what the implications of such

a “new reality” are for the Canadian electoral system. The thesis topic, and hypothesis, centers around these concepts of an election shown by the respective electoral systems as well as whether they properly demonstrate a recognition of, and hence accommodate, the “new reality.” This third chapter about the concepts of an election embedded within the respective electoral systems provides a link between the analyses of each of those two systems from the preceding as well as subsequent chapters. This is done through the way in which it presents the new situation – one which may or may not justify change from one system to the other.

The fourth chapter measures the mixed-member proportional system against the same criteria for an electoral system that are laid out in the first chapter. It evaluates whether, on the basis of the evidence presented, an MMP system maximizes the most important of those criteria. It also similarly attempts to determine if the fundamentally different concept of an election embodied in the MMP system enables it to fit such criteria. As MMP reflects a different vision of an election, this alternative electoral system demonstrates different goals which are considered and introduced.

The fifth chapter examines the potential outcomes, both positive and negative, from an electoral system change to MMP in Canada – a change (to a system that reflects a highly different concept of an election) which may potentially be introduced as a way of attempting to address any perceived problems. It provides the evaluation of such a change. This chapter is included because of the way a mixed-member proportional system achieves different criteria for a “good” electoral system. The impact created by the divergent

concepts of an election is evaluated through these outcome results. An investigation of the potential outcomes from such change will provide insight into potential solutions to problems. Through this evaluation of these outcomes from change to a new electoral system, the chapter broaches the question of why Canada has retained the current SMP system. It appears that one of the major dilemmas preventing the replacement of the current single-member plurality system of voting with another electoral system revolves around alternative perceptions of the flaws in the status quo and the strengths of a replacement. These perceptions, in turn, depend upon divergent concepts of what an election is intended to achieve and what an electoral system is to provide. The potential outcomes evaluated from change to a mixed-member proportional system also show, in actual practice, the different concept of an election embodied in that system.

Finally, the conclusion recaps the arguments and findings of the thesis about the presence of different concepts of an election reflected by the two respective electoral systems. The overall diagnosis is reviewed.

In addition, having explained the outcomes from a change to a mixed-member proportional system, one which reflects a much different concept of an election and meets different criteria for a “good” electoral system, an appendix is added which analyzes possible impediments to such electoral reform in Canada. A large part of the thesis research has been directed at examining why electoral reform has not yet happened, and may not happen, in Canada regardless of increasing calls for change. This illustrates that electoral reform is not as easy as one might think. A number of notable barriers to

electoral system change are highlighted and explained. It is important to note that there have been previous reform proposals – embodying alternative concepts of an election – to which much of the population has been resistant. Moreover, the appendix section provides insight into possible ways in which the resistance and/or inertia towards electoral reform can be overcome in Canada. This aspect is included in order to answer important questions about how electoral system change can in fact potentially be introduced in spite of the numerous and substantial barriers in place in Canada.

One of the difficulties underpinning this analysis is the imbalance in the literature – both scholarly and popular – on electoral reform. Substantially less literature argues against electoral reform and concomitantly much of the discussion on the strengths and assumptions of the single-member plurality system must, as a result, be inferential and thus original.

To elaborate on this point, the thesis attempts to provide an original interpretation of the conceptual underpinning of an election and the way elections today are shaped by a “new reality” that affects the capacity of an electoral system to achieve its purposes and, consequently, determines whether the system is still suitable in the present day. In turn, those purposes constitute what are described here as the attributes of a “good” electoral system. Additionally, the thesis offers insights into how the substantial barriers to change can in fact be overcome. The reality is that different assumptions about what an election is to achieve and what a voting system is to provide tend to be ignored entirely in literature on the topic of electoral reform. For example, many criticize SMP’s

disproportional translation of vote share into seat share without recognizing that the system was never intended to make any connection between those two results – therefore also failing to realize how the concept of an election reflected can determine whether the system achieves a particular measure. This thesis therefore makes an original contribution by encouraging us to think about an election in these different ways. Moreover, little attention is paid by others to recognizing the barriers in place to the electoral reform which is often prescribed to fix the numerous problems identified, and it is even less common for ideas to be advanced about how such barriers to electoral system change may nevertheless be overcome in Canada. Furthermore, the criteria for a “good” electoral system introduced in the thesis diverge considerably from those factors argued by others to be the most important. Not everyone shares the views presented here about what constitutes a “good” electoral system and which criteria are most vital – as can be seen in the difference from the prioritizing of criteria by several recent major reports or commissions. Others would, and have done so, make contrasting arguments to those of the thesis.

Finally, electoral reform is an important topic. It is being given increased attention worldwide, in terms of both media coverage and parliamentary studies, and many countries – including both emerging and established democracies – have been actively engaged in selecting and implementing new electoral systems over the past 15 years. Within the past decade in Japan, New Zealand, Italy, Wales, and Scotland, MMP has been introduced as a replacement electoral system. Electoral reform is similarly a rising issue on the political agenda in Canada – as several provinces are taking initiative and

moving forward with the process, and the federal NDP and Green Party have sought electoral reform on the national level. Recently, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, British Columbia, Quebec, and Ontario have initiated studies looking at the electoral system in an effort to determine what the greatest problems are. Many have made, or are in the process of making, recommendations about what can be done to address perceived problems. The debate over electoral system reform in Canada has moved beyond the university and think-tank seminar room all the way onto the floor of numerous legislatures and may soon even find its way into coffee shops all across the country.

CHAPTER ONE

Criteria For a “Good” Electoral System

Is it possible to design a “good” electoral system? If so, what would be its key qualities? In recent years, electoral reform has been examined in a number of jurisdictions within Canada and elsewhere worldwide; however, the published reports offer conflicting recommendations because the problems and solutions are set in different determinations of what constitutes a “good” electoral system.

One of the most fundamental steps in choosing a “good” electoral system is ranking the criteria considered to be most important.¹ This can be done by creating a list of criteria for both what one wants to achieve and avoid as well as for what one wants the legislature to look like.² Since not all criteria can be achieved within a single electoral system, it is necessary to establish priorities among the alternatives. The criteria determined to be the most important constitute the foundation of a “good” electoral system. The main purpose and ultimate intention of this first chapter is to spell out what is a “good” electoral system. This is done through illustrating the leading importance of certain criteria and the lower significance of other factors.

As noted, a number of jurisdictions have sponsored electoral reviews that aim to shape the electoral system. Furthermore, as such new initiatives are launched, it is

¹ Douglas J. Amy, *Behind the Ballot Box : A Citizen's Guide to Voting Systems*, (Westport, Connecticut : Praeger, 2000), 22.

² Andrew Ellis, “Principles of Electoral System Choice,” presented at the Sixth Global Forum on Reinventing Government (May 2005), Seoul, South Korea; Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 4.

possible to build on the previous experiences and insights. As a case in point, when the Ontario Legislative Assembly established a Select Committee on Electoral Reform in 2005, the Committee's Research Officer, Larry Johnston, was able to provide its members with a background document on the experiences of electoral reform commissions in four jurisdictions.³ Johnston's memorandum "provides background on criteria the Committee might consider for use in its examination of the current and alternative electoral systems," in particular drawing from previous studies undertaken by the Law Commission of Canada, New Zealand's Royal Commission, the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly, and the Jenkins Commission in Britain.⁴ One of the striking contributions of this memorandum is a table listing the criteria emphasized as being the most important in each of the four reports.

These four specific commission report examples are used here for the reason that each one is unique since it focuses on a different type of system or level of government. The Law Commission is the only report highlighted here in the chart which focuses on the federal level of government, the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly example looks at the provincial level, the New Zealand Royal Commission is based on a single jurisdiction, and the Jenkins Commission examines a different example of a unitary system of government. Each of these four reports highlighted in the table offer an example of a particular recent government-sponsored group studying and debating the key criteria for an electoral system, in a way similar to the thesis analysis, and providing its own conclusions.

³ Larry Johnston, *Criteria for Assessing Electoral Systems* (July 26, 2005) - a Memorandum to the Select Committee on Electoral Reform. Johnston is a staff member in the Research and Information Services branch of the Ontario Legislative Library.

⁴ *Ibid.* 1.

Table 1
Consolidated Election System Evaluative Criteria⁵

	Law Reform Commission of Canada	New Zealand Royal Commission	B.C. Citizens' Assembly	Jenkins Commission
a. Proportionality	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)
b. Demographic Representation	(2)	(2)		(5)
c. Effective Local Representation	(4)	(5)	(2)	(4)
d. Effective Government	(5)	(7)	(5)	(2)
e. Voter Choice and Efficacy	(8)	(6)	(3)	(3)
f. Effective Parliament	(7)	(8)		(7)
g. Effective Parties	(9)	(9)	(4)	(6)
h. Political Integration	(10)	(4)		

Four other criteria received only one mention: Diversity of Ideas and Accountable Government, by the Law Reform Commission; and Effective Māori Representation and Legitimacy by the New Zealand Electoral Commission.

As can be seen from the table, proportionality is the consensus top criterion across all four reports; after that, the agreement breaks down about which other criteria are the most important and which are not. Furthermore, there is no standard number of factors to address in designing a “good” electoral system. For example, the New Brunswick Commission on Legislative Democracy settled on eight “democratic values” that should be reflected in an electoral system.⁶

Table 2
New Brunswick’s Eight Democratic Values

<i>Fairness</i>	• the electoral system should be fair to voters, parties, and candidates. It should not benefit one group of voters or one political party at the expense of another.
<i>Equality</i>	• all votes should count equally when electing MLAs
<i>Representative</i>	• our legislature should not just represent voters living in a particular geographic area, but should also represent the diverse faces and voices of our society.
<i>Open</i>	• the basis of a transparent and participatory democracy for people. It is an essential ingredient to help keep government accountable to citizens.

⁵ Larry Johnston, *Criteria for Assessing Electoral Systems - a Memorandum to the Select Committee on Electoral Reform.*, p.7.

⁶ New Brunswick Commission on Legislative Democracy, *Final Report and Recommendations*. Fredericton, New Brunswick. March 2005. p. 8.

<i>Effective</i>	• the government and legislature are able to take decisions, consider diverse viewpoints, and respond to changing economic and social circumstances.
<i>Accountable</i>	• requires governments and legislatures to justify their actions on a regular basis, while allowing voters to pass judgment at election time on the performance of their representatives.
<i>Inclusive</i>	• inclusion of different types of people and differing viewpoints is at the heart of a participatory democracy.
<i>Choice</i>	• Choosing candidates, parties, and leaders at election time is the central democratic action of voters. Voters must have real choices in a healthy and vibrant democracy.

The analysis that follows will focus on three primary criteria for a “good” electoral system: proportionality, effective votes, and uncompromised votes. The rationale for this group will be provided as well as some observations about the relationship of these criteria to some of the others noted above. While the Ontario report by Larry Johnston shown as Table 1 lists numerous important factors – more than just three – that are considered to be important, there are several reasons why three leading criteria are emphasized in the thesis instead of a different number. One primary reason for this number being selected here is because three is a manageable number of criteria to focus on which does not pull the topic in too many different directions and does not go off on too many unimportant tangents. Moreover, as will be explained throughout the remainder of the chapter, those three particular criteria also stand out far more than any other number of factors. These three criteria can cover the achievements of all of the many others listed. Consequently, the other factors can thus be eliminated as leading criteria for a “good” electoral system.

Criterion #1 – Fair and Accurate Conversion of Votes into Seats

Proportionality is defined here as the attainment by an electoral system of a fair and accurate conversion of a party’s vote share into its seat share. In a “good” electoral

system, the representation of parties in Parliament would mirror as closely as possible the relative level of voter support for those parties. The pertinence of such an aspect relates to the way in which democratically elected legislatures are given the authority to make laws for citizens primarily because they are to accurately mirror the distribution of the political views of the electorate.⁷ This is successfully the case if the legislature properly reflects the distribution of support for parties – which embrace different political ideologies – through a proportional number of seats in relation to votes. According to the BC Citizens' Assembly, “Democracy is 'rule by the people,' therefore, the results of an election – the number of seats won by each party – should reflect the number of votes each party has earned from the voters.”⁸ Furthermore, it asserts that “Voters' preferences should determine who sits in our legislature – that is fair.”⁹ The Law Commission also presents the belief that an electoral system is fair if each party's share of the legislature is approximately proportionate to its voting strength within the electorate.¹⁰

Electoral systems differ significantly in how accurately they convert vote share into parliamentary seat share. The composition of Parliament more accurately reflects voters' wishes when proportionality is improved. Large discrepancies between a party's vote share and its seat share generate questions about the fairness of a voting system and about the ability of the legislature to represent the will of the electorate.¹¹ A distorted vote-to-seat translation may harm not only this perception of fairness of the election but

⁷ Amy, *Behind the Ballot Box : A Citizen's Guide to Voting Systems*, 15.

⁸ Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, *Making Every Vote Count : The Case for Electoral Reform in British Columbia* (December 2004), p. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.* 2

¹⁰ Law Commission of Canada, *Voting Counts: Electoral Reform for Canada* (March 2004), Section 3.3.1.

¹¹ Amy, *Behind the Ballot Box: A Citizen's Guide to Voting Systems*, 15.

also the legitimacy of the outcome. For example, it may be difficult to view a party as the legitimate election victor if that party wins the most seats, and thus “wins” the election, without winning the most votes. Such disparities in election results can also cause many citizens to become dissatisfied with an electoral system, and may contribute to voter apathy. Moreover, a poor translation of vote share into seat share by an electoral system means that voters’ preferences are not acceptably reflected in the composition of Parliament. A “good” electoral system consequently needs to do a good job of giving each party its fair share of seats.

In illustrating the paramount importance of this criterion, a lack of proportionality harms many other aspects of the electoral system. It creates significant shortcomings that stem from disproportional election results such as artificial majorities, “wrong winners,” and wasted votes. As a result, distorting of election results is a serious flaw in an electoral system and needs to be addressed in a “good” electoral system.

The enormous positive ripple effect that would result from greater proportionality, or harmful impact if not achieved, makes this criterion necessary if any improvements to an electoral system are to be attained or if any such problems and discontent are to be addressed. A February 2001 survey conducted by Ipsos-Reid, for example, indicated that 60 percent of Canadians would prefer an electoral system that produces proportional election results over the option of a system which produces strong majority governments.¹²

The proportionality factor is therefore also clearly of high priority among Canadian

¹² Darrell Bricker and Martin Redfern, “Canadian Perspectives on the Voting System,” *Policy Options*, Vol. 22, No. 6. (July-August 2001), p. 23.

citizens. Voters may also gain a greater sense of trust in an electoral system that is seen to convert votes into seats in a more fair and accurate manner.¹³ This substantial ripple effect, both positive if the criterion is fulfilled and negative if not, justifies rating the degree to which an electoral system achieves proportionality in its election results as the most fundamental assumption which underpins a “good” electoral system.

Criterion #2 – Minimizing “Wasted” Votes

In the 1997 federal election, only slightly over one-third of elected candidates (35.2%), received a majority of votes in their riding.¹⁴ In effect, in nearly two-thirds of all ridings, a majority of voters did not get the candidate they wanted. Moreover, if one adds up the votes gained by all the winning candidates on the Liberal side in the 1993 and 1997 federal elections, they amount to only 30.8% and 25.9%, respectively, of the total valid vote cast on those occasions.¹⁵ These are the limited number of voters whose ballots actually “counted” in the sense that their preferences determined who specifically would govern – with a majority government, no less, in both cases.¹⁶ Hence, as these examples have illustrated, it is highly possible that only a relatively small portion of votes actually have a direct impact in determining the final composition of Parliament.

These facts point to the problem of “wasted” votes. “Wasted” votes are defined here as those which do not have a direct impact on the final seat total numbers won by the

¹³ Courtney, *Elections*, 158.

¹⁴ Heather MacIvor, “A Brief Introduction to Electoral Reform,” in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 23.

¹⁵ J. Paul Johnston and Harold Jansen, “Elections and Electoral Systems,” in Janine Brodie, ed., *Critical Concepts : An Introduction to Politics*, (Toronto : Prentice Hall, 2001), 176.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 176.

respective parties competing in the election, and consequently do not serve to benefit any party – not even the party for which they were cast. The term “wasted votes” includes two types of votes. The first are votes cast for a winning candidate in a district in excess of the number of votes needed to win a plurality. Second, the term is also defined to include votes cast for a losing candidate in a riding whose party therefore receives nothing in terms of parliamentary representation in return for any of their votes within that particular riding as well as those cast for candidates whose party does not win a single seat in Parliament across all ridings. Taken to an extreme, some parties can end up with no representation at all in parliament because of such wasted votes even though they are supported by significant numbers of voters.

A “good” electoral system maximizes “effective” votes – those that actually directly benefit the party for which they were cast – and, conversely, minimizes wasted votes that do not.¹⁷ It is undemocratic that one's vote may mean “nothing” by being “wasted.” “In a . . . robust democracy, all, or nearly all votes, contribute to the makeup of the legislature.”¹⁸ This means that, on the one hand, votes in excess of the plurality needed for victory in a riding are still acknowledged as part of the party's level of popular support but also that votes which fall short of the plurality still have meaning in the share of overall seats won by the party.

It is important that voters actually see that their votes make a difference in the overall election results. A perception among the public that their votes do not matter

¹⁷ Amy, *Behind the Ballot Box : A Citizen's Guide to Voting Systems*, 16

¹⁸ Nick Loenen, “A Case For Changing the Voting System and a Consideration of Alternative Systems,” in Gordon Gibson, ed., *Fixing Canadian Democracy*, (Vancouver : Fraser Institute, 2003), 53.

because of how many are essentially wasted can be discouraging for voters, and may contribute to voter cynicism as well as declining participation and turnout. An electoral system which is seen as minimizing wasted votes can create more of a feeling among the electorate that their votes do in fact matter, which likely increases public interest in elections, and potential voters are given less reason not to cast their ballot. The smaller the number of wasted votes, the greater the number of voters whose preferences are actually reflected in the outcome of the election and are therefore reflected in the composition of Parliament.

This “effective” votes criterion for a “good” electoral system is ranked second in significance behind that of proportionality because wasted votes do not cause the same overarching negative impact on as many other aspects of an electoral system as do disproportional election results, but nevertheless still create a substantial harmful ripple effect throughout.

Criterion #3 – Minimizing Compromised Voting

The act of voting, especially in a system in which the elector casts a single ballot, masks a wide variety of evaluations. Is the individual elector placing a priority on a political party, a local candidate, a party leader, or some major issue? The structure of the present Canadian electoral system – marking an ‘X’ on a single ballot – may require voters to compromise between and among these factors. For example, voters may want to support a candidate but not necessarily that candidate's party, or vice versa, therefore creating compromised, or possibly strategic, voting which does not properly reflect true

voter preferences if such distinctions cannot be made. An electoral system that provides the ability to express separate preferences for a range of such considerations would minimize such compromising of voting choices.

In other cases, a vote is placed beside the name of one candidate as a strategic measure to block the possible success of another. Voters may feel a need to defect from their first preference and vote strategically in order to try to prevent some other party or candidate that they dislike from winning. For example, the January 2006 federal election saw both the NDP and Liberals extensively pleading during the campaign to supporters of the other respective party to cast a strategic vote for their party, even if only for this one election, in order to try to stop a Conservative victory. A poll conducted by Decima in April 2006 found that 17 percent of electors voted strategically for a party that was not their top choice, motivated primarily by a desire to defeat the Liberals (which led more than one-quarter of those strategic voters to vote for the NDP), in the January 2006 election.¹⁹ While that may seem like a relatively small number, “the Decima analysis points out that the election results hinged on fewer than 20,000 votes in 14 ridings, where the split between the Liberals and NDP allowed the Tories to win” and that “had the Liberals won those ridings, they would have formed a minority government.”²⁰ Such strategic voting may often be the case when voters recognize that their top choice has no chance of winning under the particular electoral system's calculation method.

¹⁹ Joan Bryden, “Poll finds merit in NDP-Liberal merger,” *Vancouver Sun*, April 26, 2006, p. A6.

²⁰ *Ibid.* A6.

Strategic voting is a major problem which causes electors to essentially forfeit their first choice votes because they feel that they do not have the ability to indicate their true voting preferences with their ballot. Strategic voting gives a misleading impression of the parties' actual level of support among voters because the results do not accurately reflect true voter preferences, as it is uncertain what those voters' true choices would have been if they felt free to cast a sincere first choice vote without fear of it being wasted. When such strategic voting is widespread, the composition of the legislature is less likely to be an accurate depiction of what voters want to have represent them.

“The impact of second choice voting on party fortunes is not trivial.”²¹ The probability that an individual's vote materially affects the outcome is an important predictor of whether one votes for his or her first or second choice party.²² A psychological effect might be created in regards to not casting a sincere vote. “Theories of rational or strategic voting assume that voters are motivated by a desire to affect the outcome of an election and thus will only support candidates who have a reasonable chance of winning” in an effort to avoid “wasting” their vote.²³

A system providing voters with a better opportunity to express their uncompromised choices conveys more information about true voter preferences. The more genuinely voters are able to express their views with their votes, the greater the likelihood that what

²¹ Jerome H. Black, *Second-Choice Voting in Canadian Federal Elections : A Test of the Multicandidate Calculus of Voting*, (Rochester, New York : University Microfilms International, 1976), 308.

²² *Ibid.* 322

²³ Karp et al. “Strategic Voting, Party Activity, and Candidate Effects : Testing Explanations for Split Voting in New Zealand’s New Mixed System.” *Electoral Studies*. Vol. 21. Issue 1. (March 2002): 3.

governments do – as well as its overall composition in the first place – will reflect what citizens want.²⁴ Similarly, if electors feel more able to vote for the choice which best represents their views, the legislature is more likely to better reflect the overall distribution of viewpoints and perspectives as they exist in society.²⁵

Voters should feel able to vote for the candidate or party that is their first choice – in other words, to cast an uncompromised vote – as that is “the whole point of voting.”²⁶ It is a basic democratic feature that voters feel able to express themselves in such a manner with their votes, and not instead feel a need to shift their vote to a more viable party rather than potentially waste their vote for their preferred choice which may have essentially no chance of election. Consequently, in order to give voters this clearer voice, a “good” electoral system needs to provide a higher range of voter choice – such as enabling a voter to distinguish between a vote for a candidate and a vote for a party – which minimizes the perceived need or motivation for casting a compromised, rather than a sincere, vote. Otherwise, voters may be caused to feel alienated from the election process and unrepresented by elected officials precisely as a result of compromised voting choices.²⁷ For a healthy democracy, we need to have the fullest possible opportunity to choose a Parliament that best represents our interests.²⁸ This is clearly not the case when the structure of an electoral system requires a significant proportion of participants to compromise their voting choices.

²⁴ Andre Blais. “Criteria for Assessing Electoral Systems.” *Electoral Insight*. Vol. 1 No. 1 (June 1999), p.6

²⁵ Ibid. 4.

²⁶ Amy, *Behind the Ballot Box : A Citizen's Guide to Voting Systems*, 17.

²⁷ Ibid. 14.

²⁸ Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, *Making Every Vote Count: The Case for Electoral Reform in British Columbia* (December 2004), p. 2.

For all of these reasons, the importance of an electoral system limiting as much as possible the compromising of voting choices, which contributes to a perceived need for strategic voting, stands as the third leading criterion which underpins a “good” electoral system. Many other major problems result as a ripple effect from voting choices being compromised – something which adds considerably to the importance of this factor.

Other Criteria for a “Good” Electoral System

Many other criteria for a “good” electoral system are also emphasized by recent government sponsored reports on electoral reform; however, they are considered here to be less important because they do not create the same positive impact on other aspects of an electoral system as do the leading three criteria just discussed. These other factors will be described as “secondary” criteria. Larry Johnston’s background document noted earlier, which was prepared for the Ontario Legislature’s Select Committee on Electoral Reform, serves as a convenient starting point for a review of secondary criteria and helps to provide the case for their secondary status.

These numerous other criteria have not been overlooked. It is important to also recognize these other, less important criteria. This is because one must understand why all other factors are less imperative towards a “good” electoral system than the leading three. The purpose and intention of also looking at these other criteria here is to demonstrate and explain how such factors are in fact merely secondary, ripple effect benefits which can be attained anyway as a positive side product of the achievement of

the three preeminent criteria. As will be shown, the many different criteria highlighted by the four reports indicated on Larry Johnston's chart – for example, all ten of the criteria emphasized by the New Zealand Royal Commission – can actually be subsumed under the three criteria considered here in the thesis to be the most important.

The Law Commission of Canada, the New Zealand Royal Commission, and the Jenkins Commission in Britain all placed “demographic representation” high on the list of criteria to be met by electoral reform. However, a system with improved proportionality (criterion # 1 for the thesis), which consequently allows smaller parties and independent candidates a greater chance of winning parliamentary representation, should already fulfill this criterion anyway by leading to a parliament that reflects a wider range of the electorate as a whole.

In addition, improved proportionality can make minority or coalition governments more common which, in turn, creates the need for more compromise in Parliament, as well as the consideration of a wider range of views, in order to pass legislation because of there not being a majority government party which can merely impose its own will. Such an outcome contributes to the attainment of the “political integration” criterion emphasized by the New Zealand Royal Commission as well as the “diversity of ideas,” “effective opposition,” and “inclusive decision-making” criteria highlighted by the Law Commission.

Next, the criterion of “effective local representation” is emphasized by all four commission reports. A more proportional system like MMP, which seeks greater

proportionality while continuing to have at least half of the members elected through single-member local districts, clearly does not abandon identifiable representatives for specific geographic constituencies. Moreover, the “effective government,” “effective parties,” and “effective parliament” criteria emphasized by the four reports can similarly all be maintained or even enhanced by an electoral system which gives a fairer number of seats to parties by improving proportionality and limiting wasted as well as compromised votes. This is done while also bringing about the many other benefits enjoyed as a result of improving those aspects.

The goal of “stability” is implicit in the effective government, parties, and parliament criterion found in all four reports. This is because system-wide stability is closely related to, and consequently greatly contributes to, the effectiveness that is desired from government, parties, and parliament. Stability is nevertheless also considered to merely be a secondary criterion for a “good” electoral system since it is not always necessarily a positive feature. We may become concerned about there being too much stability and/or consistency if the same government rules over an extremely lengthy period of time essentially unchallenged to any significant degree.²⁹

The criterion of “voter choice and efficacy” is placed third in priority by the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly and by the Jenkins Commission, sixth by the New Zealand Royal Commission, and eighth by the Law Commission of Canada. This principle essentially incorporates both criterion # 2 (limiting wasted votes) and criterion # 3 (minimizing compromised or strategic voting) emphasized by the thesis.

²⁹ Andre Blais. “Criteria for Assessing Electoral Systems.” *Electoral Insight*. Vol. 1. No. 1. (June 1999) : 5.

Furthermore, the “regional balance” criterion considered to be the ninth priority by the Law Commission is achieved as a secondary benefit of using a calculation method which creates improved proportionality (criterion #1). This is because higher proportionality limits the problem of regional parties being overrewarded and national parties being underrewarded in terms of seats by a plurality calculation method.

Finally, the “legitimacy” criterion introduced by the New Zealand Royal Commission is a positive secondary product of the achievement of the three essential criteria highlighted above because an electoral system which does not waste a substantial number of votes or cause voting choices to be compromised can be seen as increasing the legitimacy of a government elected under that system. This is done by an electoral system which only gives a majority of seats, and thus of legislative powers, in Parliament to a government which has actually earned a majority of votes through a more proportional calculation method.

In conclusion, this subsection has illustrated how these criteria emphasized as being the most important by the respective commission reports, while in a highly different order of priority (which shows the arguments presented here to be unique from those contrasting ones given in the reports), are covered by the three criteria of proportionality, effective votes, and uncompromised votes. Consequently, the other factors merely reflect secondary criteria which can nevertheless also be realized by an electoral system as a positive ripple effect which results from the system's achieving those three leading criteria.

Democratic Values Criteria Desired to be Reflected in an Electoral System

The final report, released in March 2005, by the New Brunswick Commission on Legislative Democracy (CLD) provides further support for limiting the determination of a “good” electoral system to the three criteria set out above. The New Brunswick Commission asserted that “by considering which values matter most to us as individual citizens, it helps us determine more precisely what kinds of changes we need to bring to our democratic institutions.” Additionally, while the Commission believed that all the democratic values it listed were valid, “it is clear to us that when it comes to making choices about democratic renewal, some values assume greater importance.”³⁰

The principal significance, in terms of contributing towards the thesis, of this New Brunswick CLD report lies both in how it presents a democratic values perspective to be reflected in a “good” electoral system as well as the way in which it demonstrates additional justification and evidence for the three criteria emphasized here as being the most important. A particular reason to draw attention to the New Brunswick CLD's report is that all eight of the values criteria which it highlights are entirely encompassed within the three leading factors of proportionality, “effective” votes, and sincere voting. Thus, all eight important democratic values criteria listed by a government-sponsored commission report can be collapsed down into the three key criteria from here in the thesis. In this way, the particular report provides some affirmation of the thesis argument about the preeminent importance of those three criteria.

³⁰ New Brunswick Commission on Legislative Democracy, *Final Report and Recommendations*. Fredericton, New Brunswick. March 2005. p. 8.

Table 2 (on page 3), which is drawn from page 8 of the Commission's final report, highlights fairness (ie. proportionality), equality of votes (ie. all votes have the same direct impact on results, and thus are not wasted), results which are representative of the support of parties (ie. proportionality), and choice (ie. votes are not compromised, as there exists a sufficient range of voter choice) as being four out of its eight criteria. These criteria are considered by both the thesis and the Commission to be the most basic and fundamental democratic values.

The other four values criteria named by the New Brunswick CLD are “openness,” “effectiveness,” “accountability,” and “inclusiveness.” As will be demonstrated later in the thesis evaluation, “openness” and “accountability” can be achieved, if not enhanced, in an electoral system that is built around the three key criteria developed earlier in this chapter. Rather than being lost as the outcome of such a change, these two values criteria are shown to be resulting secondary benefits which are covered – along with the many other benefits gained – by the wide scope of factors which that changed system successfully achieves as a positive product of the three leading criteria. Likewise, the remaining two democratic values of effectiveness and inclusiveness pointed out by the Commission have already been explained in this chapter to also be of lower importance than the three leading criteria for the reason that they can already be covered anyway as secondary benefits of the leading three criteria.

Evolving needs and demands over time place different expectations on an electoral system. Society is changing and with it are its concepts of “democracy.” Such a situation

of 'new realities' means that the attainment of certain different criteria may be considered more essential in the present than had previously been the case. The New Brunswick Commission's report believes the eight democratic values listed in the table to be “the test for whether our current democratic institutions and practices should be changed to make them stronger for citizens, and how this should be done.”³¹ In fact, the CLD states that the key democratic values used in its work “reflect our expanded notion of democracy today” and that “for many voters, these have become the new measures of democratic expectation and legitimacy.”³² Such ideas and concepts may not have been taken into consideration – or were not yet considered necessary – in the past, particularly during the gradual development of the current single-member plurality electoral system.

Changes in order to achieve such criteria, which reflect these key values, are recognized as being a means of strengthening and modernizing the electoral system to make it more fair (ie. more proportional), open, accountable and accessible.³³ The Commission's report also states that this improving of fairness and equality of votes, which is considered central to democratic satisfaction, can be done without having to sacrifice the values of effectiveness and accountability that are benefits under the current system.³⁴ Since an electoral system has a major impact on people's view of whether their votes count and if their choices are reflected in the composition of the legislature, it needs to reflect these most important democratic values.

³¹ New Brunswick Commission on Legislative Democracy, *Final Report and Recommendations*. Fredericton, New Brunswick. March 2005. p. 9.

³² Ibid. 7.

³³ Ibid. 7.

³⁴ Ibid. 9.

Research conducted for the New Brunswick Commission across 20 elections in 19 countries between 1996 and 2001 revealed an apparent linkage between voter satisfaction and the choice of electoral system, in particular by illustrating that the degree of proportionality affects citizens' evaluations of the fairness and responsiveness of their democracy.³⁵ The findings suggest that the more disproportional the system, the lower the evaluation of the fairness of the election by voters and the less satisfied voters were. In turn, less satisfied voters were more negative in their feelings about the responsiveness of the elected officials. It was the considered opinion of both the thesis and the CLD that a change to an electoral system that places a high priority on proportional election results will confront this problem.³⁶

The leading importance of the proportionality criterion is given further supportive validity by the New Brunswick Commission in its judgment that “the electoral system influences many parts of our democratic life, including the kinds of individuals who get elected, the interests that get represented in the legislature, the partisan composition of the legislature, the way voters participate in an election and the functioning of the legislature.”³⁷ It is consequently acknowledged to be important, particularly from a democratic values point of view, that election results accurately portray the voters' wishes through a high degree of proportionality.

³⁵ New Brunswick Commission on Legislative Democracy, *Final Report and Recommendations*. Fredericton, New Brunswick. March 2005. p. 11.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 12.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 31.

The New Brunswick CLD also confirms the importance of the second leading criterion presented by the thesis (the minimization of “wasted” votes) by arguing that one's vote is the most important democratic expression a person has, that it must mean something, and that this is only the case if it truly counts (that is, it is not “wasted”).³⁸ The winner-take-all nature of the current single-member plurality system, especially with few parties having a realistic chance of winning, is also recognized by the CLD as often forcing compromised voting rather than voting for the candidate of choice. Consequently, such a higher likelihood for strategic voting does not thus properly represent the embodiment of this key value of 'the true voice of citizens' if voters are less likely to express their sincere choice with their ballots.³⁹ Therefore, the CLD report deems change to be necessary if such a democratic value – one which is currently unfulfilled – is to be better achieved. Such a factor would not have been thought to be essential in the more distant past when fewer parties and candidates would be competing in a riding during an election.

Lastly, the trend of declining voter turnout, to the point of a record low turnout for the 2004 federal election, is recognized by the New Brunswick Commission as being a barometer of a growing and persistent sense of disaffection with the current system and of political disengagement.⁴⁰ Consequently, change aimed at addressing this growing dissatisfaction by better reflecting the contemporary needs and values of citizens is more

³⁸ New Brunswick Commission on Legislative Democracy, *Final Report and Recommendations*. Fredericton, New Brunswick. March 2005. p. 14.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 36.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 9.

necessary now – not just a good thing, but necessary – if this negative trend is to be brought to an end. As society evolves, so do attitudes and expectations⁴¹ – reflecting the evolving needs and demands of the present day sought to be met through the leading criteria for a “good” electoral system.

Therefore, much like the thesis, the New Brunswick CLD report concludes that it is because of the inherent importance of the electoral system that governments across Canada have undertaken processes aimed at examining the appropriateness of their electoral systems, identifying key criteria, and determining potential alternatives in response to a perceived democratic malaise.⁴²

Conclusion

As a result of such factors explained in this chapter, the three criteria deemed here to be the most important in determining a “good” electoral system are consequently, in order of importance: (1) fair and accurate conversion of vote share into seat share, (2) minimizing “wasted” votes, and (3) limiting compromised voting. Such criteria are aspects which, if achieved, would lead to many perceived defects with an electoral system being avoided. The rising buzz and flurry of activity around the topic of electoral reform, both due to growing dissatisfaction with the current system and more consideration being given to the possibility of electoral reform, illustrates that the achievement of such aspects is increasingly being anticipated from an electoral system. A variety of reports on

⁴¹ New Brunswick Commission on Legislative Democracy, *Final Report and Recommendations*. Fredericton, New Brunswick. March 2005. p. 12.

⁴² Ibid. 31.

electoral reform have identified their own criteria which are viewed here as secondary criteria since, as will be further demonstrated, they can be realized through a ripple effect if a reformed electoral system permits the three primary criteria to be successfully achieved.

Now that the three most fundamental criteria for an electoral system have been introduced and explained, the following chapters will apply these three criteria to both the single-member plurality system and the mixed-member proportional system in order to determine how well each system meets these leading criteria and other important assumptions of a “good” electoral system.

CHAPTER TWO

Shortcomings of the SMP Electoral System

This chapter analyzes the single-member plurality (SMP), or “first-past-the-post,” electoral system in terms of the criteria for a “good” electoral system set out in the previous chapter. It will determine if there exists a “Problem” (perceived defects with the electoral system) in this regard or not.

Criterion #1 – Fair and Accurate Conversion of Votes into Seats

The degree of proportionality is the most important of all criteria to use to evaluate an electoral system. Proportionality was defined in Chapter One as the attainment by an electoral system of a fair and accurate conversion of a party’s vote share into its seat share. Any analysis of the current single-member plurality electoral system must, above all else, determine whether it distorts election outcomes through its translation of votes into seats.

The overwhelming evidence suggests that, indeed, some parties are over-rewarded in terms of seats under the current SMP electoral system while others receive fewer seats than their vote share should entitle them. For one thing, changes in party support from one election to the next are often magnified by first-past-the-post calculation results, as the seat totals do not properly illustrate the degree to which electoral support has changed.¹ Small swings in the national vote can cause enormous gains or losses in seats by a party.²

¹ Courtney, *Elections*, (Vancouver : UBC Press, 2004), 140.

² Heather MacIvor, “A Brief Introduction to Electoral Reform,” in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 30.

For example, the devastating drop in seats from 169 to 2 for the Conservative party in the 1993 election from 1988 was far greater than its drop in the popular vote from 43 to 16 percent.³ In addition, whereas a party may enjoy an overwhelming dominance in seats by achieving approximately 50 percent of the vote, such as the federal Liberals did in terms of seats in Ontario during the three elections from 1993 to 2000, it can also be entirely shut out of regions in which it receives a substantial portion of the vote. In exemplifying this problem situation, the proportion of seats won in the four western provinces in the 1997 election by the Reform Party was almost double its vote share, but conversely, it did not win a single riding in the entire province of Ontario despite capturing 19 percent of the popular vote in that province.⁴ Large disparities between vote share and seat share strengthen the claim that the SMP system is “an ineffective method of properly translating popular will into a number of representatives.”⁵

Rarely is the percentage of seats which a party receives in an election nearly equivalent to the percentage of votes it obtained. The conversion of votes into seats by the SMP electoral system thus paints an inaccurate picture in Parliament of the parties’ real level of voter support.⁶ A number of serious implications arise from the inability of the current electoral system to fulfill this leading assumption which underpins a “good” electoral system. This disproportionality problem demonstrates that SMP does not accurately reflect the preferences of the Canadian electorate.

³ Courtney, *Elections*, 140.

⁴ Heather MacIvor, “A Brief Introduction to Electoral Reform,” in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 33.

⁵ Jean-Francois Caron. “The End of the First-Past-the-Post System?” *Canadian Parliamentary Review*. (Autumn 1999) : 20.

⁶ John C. Courtney, “Electoral Reform and Canada’s Parties,” in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 92.

Criterion #2 – Minimizing “Wasted” Votes

“Wasted” votes were defined in Chapter One to comprise those votes that do not directly determine the final seat distribution in the election. Such wasted votes do not function to benefit any party, including the party for which they are cast. As discussed earlier, wasted votes include those cast either for a winning candidate's party in a district in excess of the number of votes needed to win a plurality (thus bringing no benefit to that or any party) as well as those cast for a losing candidate whose party receives nothing in terms of parliamentary representation in return for any of its votes. Under the single-member plurality system's seat calculation method, a party receives nothing in terms of parliamentary representation unless it wins an electoral district outright through obtaining a plurality of votes. In essence, only those votes cast for the winning candidate's party in a constituency hold any real weight in determining who is elected, and even some of those votes may actually be superfluous. Any other votes are essentially wasted in that they do not directly translate into electing members to Parliament.

In another related critique, the problem of wasted votes in the SMP system can be illustrated by adding up the votes gained by all the winning candidates on the Liberal government side in the 1993 and 1997 elections. The calculation shows that votes cast for Liberal MPs – the winning candidates who, on the basis of their pluralities of votes, exclusively formed the government party caucus – comprise only 30.8 percent and 25.9 percent, respectively, of the total valid vote cast on those occasions.⁷ These represent

⁷ J. Paul Johnston and Harold Jansen, “Elections and Electoral Systems,” in Janine Brodie, ed., *Critical Concepts : An Introduction to Politics*, (Toronto : Prentice Hall, 2001), 176.

the limited number of votes that actually “counted” in the sense that they determined the composition of the Liberal caucus – one that was large enough to form a majority government, no less, in both cases.⁸ From this perspective, the majority of voters essentially wasted their votes in that their choices were not translated into parliamentary seats; their votes thus had effectively no impact on the outcome of the election.⁹ Those voters “could have stayed home and not voted for all the difference their vote made.”¹⁰

“Typically, between 50 and 53 percent of all votes cast do not contribute to the election results” under the current SMP system.¹¹ More votes are “wasted,” in that they are cast either for losing candidates or in excess of the number needed to win a riding, and more voters are left “unrepresented,” by having voted for parties that did not win any seats, in single-member plurality elections than under any other electoral system.¹² The SMP system therefore clearly falls short in regards to meeting this second leading criterion for a “good” electoral system.

Criterion #3 – Minimizing Compromised Voting

Electors in a single-member plurality system are often uncertain about what to make a priority in determining their vote: a political party, local candidate, party leader, or some major issue. The fact is that the current electoral system does not give the electorate any such range of choice on the ballot. It uses a nominal ballot consisting of

⁸ J. Paul Johnston and Harold Jansen, “Elections and Electoral Systems,” in Brodie, *Critical Concepts*, 176.

⁹ Heather MacIvor, “A Brief Introduction to Electoral Reform,” in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 23.

¹⁰ Nick Loenen, “A Case For Changing the Voting System and a Consideration of Alternative Systems,” in Gibson, *Fixing Canadian Democracy*, 52.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 52.

¹² J. Paul Johnston and Harold Jansen, “Elections and Electoral Systems,” in Brodie, *Critical Concepts*, 176.

only a single response and does not enable rank-ordering. As a result, voters may be caused to feel that whichever voting choice they make has been compromised. Moreover, due to the the first-past-the-post basis of the current SMP system's seat allocation method, if the voter is convinced that her or his first choice has essentially no chance of winning, some may opt to vote for a party other than their first choice – in other words, to cast a strategic, rather than an unaffected or “sincere” vote. Similarly, those who might want to vote for minor parties that have little chance of winning a constituency outright may grow tired of wasting their vote and can often be persuaded to move their support instead to a larger party which they find at least somewhat compatible. As well, those who support a major party that appears to have little chance of winning in their particular constituency may instead decide to change their vote in order to try to prevent some other party or candidate which they dislike from winning. Each of these strategic compromises can also be considered a “wasted” vote in the sense that it may not convey the elector’s true message.

Some researchers have estimated that strategic voting in Canada may at times be as high as 30 percent.¹³ It is unclear what those voters’ true choices would have been if they felt free to cast an uncompromised vote, rather than a strategic vote, without fear of it being wasted. Strategic voting created under the current system does not accurately reflect true individual voter preferences or, as a result, accurate levels of support for the respective parties. Therefore, the SMP electoral system also fails to achieve this third criterion for a “good” electoral system.

¹³ Law Commission of Canada, *Voting Counts : Electoral Reform for Canada*. Final Report. March 2004. Section 3.3.8.

SMP and Other Criteria for a “Good” Electoral System

In addition to failing to achieve the three leading criteria in the ways just outlined, the current single-member plurality electoral system also falls short in regards to meeting what were described in Chapter One as “secondary” criteria for a good electoral system. Essentially all of these secondary problems are at least indirectly the negative product of the SMP system's failure to achieve the three most important criteria introduced. Such shortcomings may contribute to dissatisfaction with the current electoral system. This is not a picture of a “good” electoral system.

One of the most significant secondary problems with the single-member plurality electoral system is that it often creates an artificial majority government for the winning party. An artificial majority government is defined as a government in which a party wins a majority of the seats in the legislature without receiving a majority of the popular vote. Under the SMP system, the candidate who receives the most votes in a constituency is the winner elected to Parliament regardless of whether the winning number reflects a majority of the total votes cast. A slight edge in the number of votes received by a candidate in a constituency translates into a complete victory and the claiming of the single parliamentary seat. As noted earlier, and particularly as a result of how several major parties have emerged to compete in Canadian federal elections, a strong probability exists that a majority of citizens voted for a candidate other than the one representing them in Parliament.

Such distortions at the local constituency level also do not “even out” overall across all total ridings nationwide.¹⁴ Parties may elect many MPs in such a manner. Consequently, the combined opposition parties and their candidates as a whole commonly receive more total support than the winning party and its candidates. In this sense, a party winning a majority of seats without receiving a majority of the popular vote constitutes an artificial majority government. In effect, what we may call the “summation process” in the single-member plurality system distorts the intentions of voters in this way; the makeup of Parliament is thus not an accurate reflection of political interests that exist among the population.¹⁵ As can be seen, this artificial majority syndrome is clearly the result of the lack of proportionality under first-past-the-post calculation. The SMP system therefore fails to meet a secondary criterion: majority rule.

Creating artificial majorities can be considered one of the SMP system’s most serious weaknesses from a democratic perspective.¹⁶ In the three Canadian federal elections between 1993 and 2000, the Liberals won majority governments despite being supported by considerably less than a majority of electors. In fact, in only 3 of the 26 federal elections since 1921 has one party obtained an absolute majority of the national popular vote.¹⁷ Despite this, a majority government was produced by the SMP electoral system in 15 of these 26 elections.¹⁸ Such evidence demonstrates how the current system confers majority governing powers on parties that are supported by less than a majority of

¹⁴ Nick Loenen, “A Case For Changing the Voting System and a Consideration of Alternative Systems,” in Gibson, *Fixing Canadian Democracy*, 51.

¹⁵ Ibid. 52.

¹⁶ J. Paul Johnston and Harold Jansen, “Elections and Electoral Systems,” in Brodie, *Critical Concepts*, 176.

¹⁷ Jean Francois Caron. “The End of the First-Past-the-System?” *Canadian Parliamentary Review*. 19.

¹⁸ Ibid. 22.

voters.¹⁹ A majority Liberal government essentially monopolized legislative power in the Parliament of Canada from November 2000 to June 2004, even though it was supported by only 41 percent of the voters in 2000. Previously, support from only 38 percent of voters in the 1997 election was enough to give the Liberals a second consecutive majority government, and consequently nearly complete power over Parliament. These numbers illustrate that, in those two recent elections, about 60 percent of the national electorate implicitly voted to remove the Liberals as the governing party but failed to do so largely because of the way winners were determined – and seats were distributed – under a first-past-the-post system of calculation. For the 60 percent of Canadians who may have wanted to change the federal government by voting for another party, the artificial majority created by the current electoral system proved to be a major barrier to their doing so.²⁰

This reality naturally leads one to question whether those citizens are being properly “represented” under the current system. It appears that artificial majority governments are produced, in part, as the result of vote-splitting among opponents. In other words, one party is able to obtain a plurality of votes in enough ridings to win a majority government – often with substantially less than a majority of the popular vote – because the combined opposition vote is split between a number of different parties. One of the most noteworthy cases of such an occurrence of vote-splitting contributing to an artificial majority government under the current electoral system is the “free trade” federal election in 1988 in which the combined vote for the Liberals and the NDP – those parties opposed to the Free Trade Agreement with the United States – exceeded fifty percent and was

¹⁹ Andrew Petter, “The Failings of First-Past-the-Post,” in Gibson, *Fixing Canadian Democracy*, 69.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 79.

together greater than the vote total for the Conservative Party which supported the Free Trade Agreement. The Conservatives were nevertheless able to win an artificial majority government, and accordingly were able to implement the Free Trade Agreement which was implicitly voted against by a majority of the electorate, due to the vote-splitting among those parties opposed to free trade.

Another substantial secondary problem warranting criticism is the possibility that disproportionality may create “wrong winners.” In addition to distorting constituency election results, the SMP electoral system can affect which party wins an election as a result of how efficiently parties translate vote shares into seats. There are numerous cases where the party that received the greatest overall popular vote support did not win the most seats and therefore did not “win” the election. Few, if any, would argue that this possibility is a desirable feature of an electoral system.

In the simplest scenario, which is a direct result of the first-past-the-post nature of seat allocation under the current system, one party can win the most seats in an election but with slight pluralities while another party can exceed the winning party's total number of votes yet win fewer seats because its support is more concentrated – in landslide proportions – in fewer ridings. Despite being outnumbered in overall voter support across all ridings, the former party would emerge as the “winner” due to having captured the higher number of seats in the legislature. This problem of possible “wrong winners” thus results from the SMP system not reflecting a consideration of the aggregate vote totals, and consequently not paying attention to proportionality in election outcomes. In such a

“wrong-winner” situation, the will of the electorate has not been properly served. Examples of such an occurrence taking place in Canada include the 1957, 1962, and 1979 federal elections, as well as recent provincial elections in British Columbia in 1996 and Quebec in 1998. These are all instances in which the party that won the popular vote did not win the most constituencies and consequently did not win the overall election. When there are “wrong winners,” how can it reasonably be argued that the SMP electoral system is properly representing the preferences of citizens?

In an additional critique, the SMP system is also infamous for its tendency to over-reward winning parties. That is, the winning party can usually count on winning far more seats than it earns from its share in the popular vote.²¹ A first-past-the-post system produces large parliamentary majorities from narrow electoral pluralities.²² This is most noticeable when SMP produces a landslide election victory for a party that actually does receive close to a majority of the popular vote. The degree to which a party is over-rewarded soars once its percentage of the vote approaches fifty, and leads to disproportionate victories.²³ For example, in the 1997 federal election, the Liberals won all but two of the 103 seats in Ontario on the shoulders of just under one-half of the vote in that province.²⁴

²¹ Frank H. Underhill, “Our Fantastic Electoral System,” in John C. Courtney, ed., *Voting in Canada*, (Scarborough, Ontario : Prentice-Hall, 1967), 32.

²² Lawrence LeDuc, “New Challenges Demand New Thinking About Our Antiquated Electoral System,” in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 63.

²³ Archer et al., *Parameters of Power : Canada's Political Institutions*, (Scarborough, Ontario : ITP Nelson, 1999), 382.

²⁴ Heather MacIvor, “A Brief Introduction to Electoral Reform,” in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 32.

Moreover, by exaggerating majorities at the expense of the opposition parties, the vote-to-seat relationship that emerges in the SMP system may considerably reduce numerically – and therefore weaken – the presence in Parliament of the opposition to the point that it cannot effectively hold the government party to account. For example, in the British Columbia provincial election in May 2001, the Liberals captured 77 seats with just under 60 percent of the popular vote; it was to be held accountable by a 2 seat NDP opposition. Such situations of government party dominance are facilitated by the SMP electoral system's translation of votes into seats and may be interpreted as contributing to a democratic deficit precisely due to this possible lack of effective opposition in the legislature.

The disproportionate conversion of votes into seats also hinders small parties which are unlikely to win any representation whatsoever in Parliament unless their vote is sufficiently concentrated in a few districts to allow them to potentially gain a plurality of votes.²⁵ Voters who support such a minor party may be essentially wasting their vote under a single-member plurality system, for it is unlikely that the minor party will gain enough support in any one single-member riding to outnumber all opponents and win the single district seat that is available. For example, although more than half a million Canadians voted for the Green Party nationwide in the 2004 election, that support was not sufficiently concentrated to elect even a single MP. At the same time, fewer than half a million Liberal voters within Atlantic Canada were able to elect 22 MPs.²⁶ Such a “first-past-the-post” system thus may be criticized for allowing little room for minor parties.

²⁵ J. Paul Johnston and Harold Jansen, “Elections and Electoral Systems,” in Brodie, *Critical Concepts*, 174.

²⁶ Fair Vote Canada, *Make Every Vote Count : This is Democracy?* Toronto. May 2005. p.2.

A related deficiency under the current electoral system to over-rewarding winning parties and under-rewarding small parties is the way that SMP over-rewards parties with regionally-concentrated voter support and consequently under-rewards parties with more thinly spread voter support. A party with geographically-concentrated support is more likely to receive a plurality of votes in a larger number of those particular constituencies within that region. This over-rewarding or under-rewarding in terms of seats creates a problematic distortion of regional representation by giving advantage to parties able to concentrate their votes in specific regions – generally at the expense of parties with a broader national appeal.²⁷

The regional distortion problem carries serious implications for the Canadian party system since it encourages parties to devise electoral strategies that seek to capitalize on it. In order to try to maximize seat totals, self-interested parties may often become increasingly regionally-focused in their messages during election campaigns. In addition, regionalized election results can contribute to the troubling problem of increased regional tensions and discontent.

The federal elections of 1993, 1997, and 2000 produced a federal Parliament fractured among five parties that were each overly dependent on a single region for its parliamentary representation.²⁸ By magnifying the electoral success of the leading party disproportionately in a province or region, the SMP electoral system can convey a

²⁷ Lawrence LeDuc, “New Challenges Demand New Thinking About Our Antiquated Electoral System,” in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 63.

²⁸ John C. Courtney, “Electoral Reform and Canada’s Parties,” in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 92.

spurious image of near unanimity within provinces or regions and ensures that party caucuses will over-represent their “best” province or region.²⁹ Under such a plurality system, parties are often completely excluded from parliamentary representation in certain provinces or even entire regions. The results of this regionalizing bias has caused parties to reflect a stronger regional divide in Parliament than their actual support among the national electorate would dictate.³⁰ This creates a misleading impression of the degree to which regional differences divide the country. In this way, as an indirect product of its failure to meet the proportionality criterion, the SMP electoral system can exaggerate the regionalism of an already regionally divided country.

Liberal dominance in elections from 1993 to 2004, which was primarily the result of its near monopolization of seats in Ontario, illustrates the way that the disproportional SMP system allows a party to form a government almost solely on the basis of support from one populous region. This can occur even when the government party is almost entirely shut out from other regions. Such situations may exacerbate a sense of regional grievances and exclusion from power in underrepresented regions.³¹ The Liberals have governed by far the most often over the past several decades while rarely receiving substantial seat totals in, and at times being entirely shut out from, Western Canada. Regions of Canada that do not support the governing party may seem to perceive the government as principally serving those regions from which it draws more of its seats in

²⁹ William P. Irvine, *Does Canada Need a New Electoral System?* (Kingston, Ontario : Institute of Intergovernmental Relations, 1979), 14.

³⁰ Archer et al., *Parameters of Power*, 383.

³¹ Alan Cairns. “The Electoral System and the Party System in Canada, 1921-1965.” *Canadian Journal of Political Science*. (March 1968) : 73.

Parliament. At the same time, because concentrating voter support contributes to an over-rewarding of seats, parties will likely want to make specific regions – those from which they anticipate to draw their greatest support – a priority in their election campaign platforms. Because of the dynamics of such a first-past-the-post electoral system, a party that wins 50 percent of the votes in one region and 25 percent in another, for example, will likely win much more than 50 percent of the seats in the one region and much less than 25 percent of the seats in the other region.³² Consequently, in an effort to boost their voter support in a region, parties sometimes become more concerned with representing the interests of those regions they already represent in the House of Commons rather than with national issues – thereby reinforcing regional differences and tensions.³³ The Reform/Canadian Alliance clearly based both its campaign effort and its electoral success on voter support from the four Western Canadian provinces while the Bloc has also done so solely on the basis of support from a single province. Seat distribution resulting from the single-member plurality system can be viewed as giving Canadian parties an incentive to emphasize regional divisions.³⁴

On the other hand, parties with nationally-dispersed voter support are penalized in terms of seats, thus discouraging parties from pursuing a nationwide, rather than a regionally-focused, appeal. This can consequently reduce further the representation of national as opposed to sectional interests. The regionally-divided Parliament created

³² Archer et al., *Parameters of Power*, 383.

³³ Ibid. 383.

³⁴ Alan Cairns. “The Electoral System and the Party System in Canada, 1921-1965.” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 1. (March 1968) : 71.

under the current system may contribute to a desire for electoral reform to create a system that provides a more accurate regional distribution of seats among parties. If it were possible for the SMP electoral system to produce more proportional election results, it is possible that Canada would not face the recurring crises brought about by regionalism and the overrepresentation of regionally-based parties in the House of Commons. Since the present system does, in fact, disproportionately reward regional parties – something which, as described, may contribute to heightened regionalism – because of the inherent nature of SMP, it fails in this way as well to meet the proportionality criterion of a “good” electoral system.

Another shortcoming of the single-member plurality electoral system is the way in which Aboriginals, women, and ethnic and racial minorities have commonly been underrepresented in Parliament. Such groups have never obtained a share of seats in Parliament even closely commensurate with their share of the total Canadian population.³⁵ The current system limits the entry point for any candidate wanting to run for office to a single nomination per party per single-member constituency.³⁶ Because constituency party organizations (the primary entities for the nomination of candidates) have been predominantly the preserve of white males, obtaining this single nomination for the single-member plurality district may often be more difficult for minority candidates. The weakness of a first-past-the-post, single-member system in opening the door for the election of minority candidates is even more evident when its record is

³⁵ John C. Courtney. “Plurality-Majority Electoral Systems : A Review.” *Electoral Insight*. Vol. 1. No. 1. (June 1999) : 9.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 9.

compared to more proportional schemes with multi-member districts in other countries where party lists can create incentives, and provide the opportunity, for parties to construct socially-diverse lists in order to try to maximize the likelihood of gaining the electoral support of a wider cross-section of the electorate.³⁷ The current electoral system, with its single-member districts and thus single party nomination, clearly provides no such opportunity. As a result, without a party nomination and endorsement, those from minority groups can only run as independent candidates, and will likely find it more difficult to obtain a plurality of votes that is needed to be elected under the current system.³⁸ The diversity attribute of a “good” electoral system (seen in the “demographic representation” criterion introduced on pages 3 and 14 of Chapter One) – something with particular relevance for as heterogeneous of a society as Canada – is thus more difficult to fulfill under a single-member plurality system.

Finally, the over-rewarding or under-rewarding distortions created by the first-past-the-post calculation method under the present SMP system means that elections are often less competitive. This, furthermore, can contribute to reduced voter interest and turnout. One is less likely to be inclined to feel a need to vote, or to be interested in election campaign developments, if the expected overall election result is not in any doubt. Such is often the case under SMP because of the disproportional landslide victories that the winning party often enjoys. In addition, the motivation to vote may be harmed by the belief that one's vote may be “wasted” under the current SMP system. The

³⁷ John C. Courtney. “Plurality-Majority Electoral Systems : A Review.” *Electoral Insight*. Vol. 1. No. 1. (June 1999) : 9.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 9.

British Columbia Citizens' Assembly argued in its preliminary report that the existing system “contributes to a growing alienation of voters from the political process, which has been reflected in falling turnout rates, especially among young voters.”³⁹ The report cites the lack of proportionality and possibility for wasted votes, among other flaws, as leading contributing factors to this alienation under the SMP system.⁴⁰ Thus, one final failure of the single-member plurality electoral system is that declining voter turnout and public interest in Canadian elections may be attributed to some degree to the structure of the system itself. As voting is a key way in which citizens express themselves politically, this is an important problem to consider.⁴¹

Therefore, it is evident that the current single-member plurality electoral system does not meet the criteria set out here for a “good” electoral system. Although a single-member plurality, or “first-past-the-post,” electoral system might prove reasonably able to meet the assumptions underpinning a “good” electoral system under a two-party system, the diverse political interests and multi-party system of modern day Canada expose the many shortcomings of SMP.

SMP as a “Good” Electoral System

Despite what has been argued so far, the SMP system in Canada does also have some positive attributes. These positive elements, no matter how limited they may be,

³⁹ Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, *A Preliminary Statement to the People of British Columbia*. Vancouver. March 2004. p. 5.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 4.

⁴¹ Law Commission of Canada, *Voting Counts : Electoral Reform for Canada*. Final Report. March 2004. Section 3.3.8.

have convinced many Canadians that it is preferable to maintain the current system – one which, at least, Canadians know how it works and what its effects are. Some of the standard defenses of a first-past-the-post system may have been weakened in recent Canadian elections due to the perversities clearly seen in the election results; nevertheless, many of those defenses are still viable. One positive aspect of the SMP electoral system is its relative simplicity in regards to both the form of the ballot and the counting procedure. It is a simple electoral system for voters to use and understand. Winners are also easily determined from a straightforward count of the ballots, and the results are known almost immediately.⁴² Moreover, it is the most familiar of all electoral systems to Canadians. This is a benefit to the extent that familiarity often increases comfort level. It has been used in all federal and most provincial elections since Confederation.⁴³ Some may consider an additional positive aspect of the SMP system to be its tendency to produce single-party majority governments, which in turn usually creates a greater likelihood of government stability.⁴⁴ Governments with a majority of seats in Parliament know that they should be able to pass all of their legislation and are far less likely to be removed from power by a vote of non-confidence during the life of a parliament. Similarly, a related virtue of SMP is that this system can commonly produce either a majority or a minority government at any given election – in contrast to most PR systems, such as MMP, which will almost always (if not guaranteed to do so) have minority governments. Consequently, the particular advantages of both respective types of government situations

⁴² Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, *A Preliminary Statement to the People of British Columbia*. Vancouver. March 2004. p.4.

⁴³ John C. Courtney. "Plurality-Majority Electoral Systems : A Review." *Electoral Insight*. Vol. 1. No. 1. (June 1999) : 8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 8.

may be enjoyed at different times under the same SMP electoral system. Furthermore, at election time voters know exactly which party is responsible for the government's performance record and can vote accordingly. The government party can thus be more easily held accountable, and easily replaced if voters so desire, at the next election – clearly another one of the system's assets. In addition, extremist parties are also usually excluded from seats in Parliament under an SMP system because they are less likely to appeal to a wide enough range of voters to win a plurality in any ridings. Finally, one other benefit is that voters in SMP constituencies have a single, clearly identifiable local representative. This creates an easily understood link between constituents and their own local MP and stands in contrast to the more complex representational relationships that often result from proportional electoral schemes in multi-member districts.⁴⁵

In the end, it is important to note that none of these positive aspects of the current single-member plurality electoral system fit within the three most important criteria of proportionality, effective votes, and uncompromised voting that were outlined in the first chapter. Such positive aspects described nevertheless show that, even though the SMP system fails to meet the three leading criteria for an electoral system and has many fundamental flaws, it still does at least attain some less important assumptions which underpin a “good” electoral system.

“What is wrong with this picture?”

Despite having some positive qualities, it has been revealed in this chapter that the single-member plurality electoral system clearly has many more shortcomings and,

⁴⁵ John C. Courtney. “Plurality-Majority Electoral Systems : A Review.” *Electoral Insight*. Vol. 1. No. 1. (June 1999) : 8.

furthermore, fails to meet any of the three most important assumptions that underpin a “good” electoral system. More and more Canadians are looking at the way SMP performs and are asking, “what is wrong with this picture?” The answers that they get to that question suggest that there are significant problems with the SMP system; moreover, many Canadians are accordingly concluding that change is not just a good thing, but is necessary. Criticism of the SMP system has been growing in recent years as inherent problems, due to its failure to meet such assumptions, have become increasingly evident and have made electoral reform the pressing issue that it is in Canada – a concern which needs to be defined, understood, and potentially addressed. The various failures of the current electoral system are seen to be significant enough that they form part of the argument that Canada is experiencing a democratic deficit.⁴⁶ It is the substantial cumulative impact of these problems which makes reform to the SMP electoral system necessary.

The next chapter will therefore be devoted to introducing the different concepts and how this reflects a new way of thinking about an election.

⁴⁶ John C. Courtney, *Elections*, 142.

CHAPTER THREE

A New Concept of an Election

The intention of this third chapter is to demonstrate that a new way of thinking about an election – a “new concept” of an election – has emerged in present-day Canada and, moreover, to explain that this new reality justifies the abandonment of the SMP electoral system. Introducing and explaining this “new reality” in this chapter increases the link between the analysis provided of both the problematic current SMP system (in the previous chapter) as well as the MMP system (in the next chapter) with its different, more modern-day vision of an election.

This chapter examines the “visions (or “concepts”) of an election” held by advocates of the single-member plurality and mixed-member proportional electoral systems. It analyzes the significant features of both the single-member plurality and the mixed-member proportional systems in order to explain the different ways in which the respective electoral systems conceptualize an election. The basic argument presented here is that the concept of an election used in the respective electoral systems allows it to successfully meet the different criteria for a “good” system. Key criteria may be largely unattainable under an electoral system if such factors were not intended, or not yet thought of, in its structure and development.

Alternative Features and Concepts of an Election

In first providing a brief overview of the basic distinguishing features of both electoral systems, it is noted that under Canada's single-member plurality system, voters

mark their single selection on a single ballot for a single preferred candidate since only one member is normally elected to the parliament per district. Political parties also usually only run a single candidate per electoral district and since only a single candidate is commonly elected, one party wins all of the representation in Parliament in each district. The one candidate who receives more votes than any other individual candidate – a plurality of votes – in each single-member riding claims the single seat that is available and is elected to Parliament while all other candidates gain nothing in return for the votes they received. The winning candidate need not, and often does not, receive a majority of the total vote in the constituency. Furthermore, the party which has the greatest number of candidates elected to Parliament normally forms the government. One final notable basic feature of the SMP system is that representation in parliament centers around clearly defined geographical constituencies with each one, as noted, represented by its own single MP.

The central features of a mixed-member proportional electoral system, as well as for the interpretation later in the chapter of the way this system conceptualizes an election, are drawn from the arrangements currently in operation in Scotland. The Scottish example of MMP is used because it illustrates a working system and is similar to that envisioned in a number of well-developed proposals both worldwide and in Canada. The choice of an MMP system instead of SMP for the Scottish Assembly, a sub-national legislature like the Canadian provinces, was introduced as part of the devolution process in Scotland and can be viewed as a means to remedy problems in that country with the single-member plurality system. A key feature of the mixed-member proportional system is that voters

cast two ballots: one for a local candidate in a single-member constituency under plurality rules, and the other vote for a preferred party. As a result, a proportion of the MPs elected under an MMP system represent single-member constituencies while the rest are selected from party lists.

Not all MMP systems are identical, however. There are variations in these numbers in different countries. In the Scottish case, 73 members (57 percent of the total) are elected in single-member constituencies and 56 members (43 percent of the total) in 8 multi-member regional ridings.¹ Multi-member districts are a central feature of this, like most other, MMP electoral systems. Members are elected from regional lists in order to correct for disproportionality from the SMP ballot results.² The distribution of regional seats in these multi-member districts in Scotland is determined by dividing the total number of votes cast for a party by the number of constituencies won by that party in the region, and then by adding one to the new total.³ As multi-member districts under MMP can enable more than one party to win seats, districts are not winner-take-all like they are under the single-member plurality system. With more than one member elected to Parliament, the districts are often larger geographically and in population because there are more MPs to serve as representatives. Moreover, since the results produced are, by definition, more proportional, the translation of votes into seats is significantly different than for the single-member plurality system.

¹ Law Commission of Canada, *Voting Counts : Electoral Reform for Canada*. Final Report. March 2004. Section 4.4.4.

² Peter Lynch, "Making Every Vote Count in Scotland : Devolution and Electoral Reform," in Henry Milner, ed., *Steps Toward Making Every Vote Count : Electoral System Reform in Canada and its Provinces*. (Peterborough, Ontario : Broadview Press, 2004), 146.

³ Law Commission of Canada, *Voting Counts : Electoral Reform for Canada*. Final Report. March 2004. Section 4.4.4.

The objective of the mixed-member proportional system is to have seats distributed according to the share of the popular vote received by the respective parties. This is done through its awarding compensatory seats to parties in order ensure that their share of the seats in the legislature matches as closely as possible their proportion of the popular vote. After the single-member plurality seats have been determined, parties are awarded the number of compensation seats necessary to produce an approximately proportional overall result calculated on the basis of the party list popular vote.⁴ It can thus clearly be seen that several fundamental features of the mixed-member proportional electoral system are substantially different from those found in the single-member plurality electoral system.

The SMP and MMP systems reflect highly different concepts of what an election is intended to achieve and what an electoral system is intended to provide. These concepts are the assumptions that the advocates of the respective systems believe should underpin an electoral system. Under the SMP electoral system, all of the rules center on the individual district contests. In other words, the individual local district contests are the main focus of the SMP electoral system rather than the larger overall picture, as in MMP and all other PR systems. It is each individual local result that matters rather than the vote total for the election as a whole. This is the fundamental assumption embedded in the single-member plurality electoral system. To use a sports analogy, that of tennis, the SMP concept of an election assumes that it is the party that scored the most points in each individual set that wins the match rather than the party that scored the highest aggregate

⁴ Heather MacIvor, "A Brief Introduction to Electoral Reform," in Henry Milner, ed., *Making Every Vote Count : Reassessing Canada's Electoral System*. (Toronto : Broadview Press, 1999), 26.

number of points over the course of the entire match. The SMP system thus mirrors tennis in that it is entirely possible for a party, like a tennis player, to score the most points (ie. receive the most total votes) but not win the tennis match (the overall election) due to not having won the highest number of individual sets (ie. did not win the most individual constituencies). The current electoral system operates on the premise that Canadian federal elections are essentially 308 separate elections, with each viewed as being independent of one another. This independence is an inherent feature of the SMP electoral system.

At an organizational level, a general election under an SMP system is essentially a constituency-based activity, despite the application of uniform procedures. Section 57 of the *Canada Elections Act* provides that “[i]n order for an election to be held” the Chief Electoral Officer issues a writ “for each electoral district.” Moreover, it is the returning officer in each constituency who declares the winner of the election “by completing the return of the writ in the prescribed form” (section 313). The votes cast in one constituency have no bearing on any other constituency. It is the results of the separate contests that are added up to determine an overall election winner. The single-member plurality system proponents view its primary purpose as determining the local representative for each district and this person is deemed to be the candidate having the largest number of votes. The aggregate effect of these selections on the composition of Parliament or the selection of a government is not considered in the *Canada Elections Act*. A proportional overall conversion of vote share into seat share for the respective parties in all of the total ridings is not viewed under SMP as being the main goal or function of an electoral system.

The mixed-member proportional electoral system embodies a significantly different concept of an election. Advocates of MMP hold the view that an electoral system should consider the bigger, overall picture. This is the fundamental assumption. Its “scoring system” was designed – unlike the present SMP system, which essentially was not designed at all but rather developed over time – to recognize and to calculate the overall result from an election. In using another sports analogy, this time that of hockey, the aggregate goal total for the entire hockey game is emphasized under an MMP system instead of only paying attention to the individual periods like SMP. Unlike the SMP system, which resembles tennis in the way described, MMP instead mirrors hockey because, unlike tennis, it is not possible for a team (a party) to lose the hockey game (the election) while scoring the highest aggregate number of goals (receiving the most overall votes) over the course of the entire game regardless of whether they scored the most goals in the highest number of individual periods (individual ridings). Proponents of a mixed-member proportional system consider the election winner to be the party with the greatest overall total of votes in all districts combined, and not merely the party that wins a plurality of votes in the greatest number of individual districts. MMP uses both the aggregate election total as well as the plurality district results to determine the election winner. This is a primary goal for the electoral system: to crown an aggregate election winner and not only the winner in the separate individual district contests. While the plurality portion of an election under the MMP system follows the same guidelines as does the SMP system, the PR part of the MMP system calculation method – in which seats are distributed to parties in order to correct for overall disproportionality from those plurality results – demonstrates that elections are viewed in this more holistic manner. Each riding is not treated as being entirely independent from one another, as is seen in the

SMP system, but rather as contributing to the overall election result – a final result which should reflect as accurately as possible the proportionate share of the vote total for each party in all ridings combined.

The more comprehensive concept of an election implicit in the mixed-member proportional electoral system reflects a response to new, modern-day realities. For example, an MMP system is driven by a fundamental assumption that elections are competitions between and among parties running in many ridings with many candidates. Consequently, since elections are seen as contests between parties rather than as contests between candidates, MMP reflects the view that the election results need to provide a better representation of overall relative support for the respective parties.

Debating Alternative Concepts of an Election in Parliament

The existence of these different concepts of what an election is to accomplish and what an electoral system is to provide which are held by advocates of the two respective systems can be seen in the records of actual arguments advanced in the Canadian House of Commons. The following examples, which help to illustrate such views, are ordered chronologically.

For the first case, on a day allocated to the opposition parties within the first few days of the life of the 37th Parliament (November 2000 - June 2004), the NDP leader Ms. Alexa McDonough (Halifax) moved

That this House strike a special all-party committee to examine the merits of various models of proportional representation and other electoral reforms, with a view to recommending reforms that would combat the increasing regionalization of Canadian politics, and the declining turnout of Canadians in federal elections.⁵

⁵ Edited Hansard, Number 017; 37th Parliament, 1st Session; Tuesday, February 20, 2001; 1005.

In her initial remarks she set out the limitations of the SMP system in stark language:

We have an electoral system based on a first past the post system. The problem with that is that the electoral system leaves too many people feeling that they do not have any way to make their vote count. They feel they may as well not vote because they know perfectly well that if they do not support the majority view then their view does not count at all and they do not have any way to influence the composition of parliament so that important, significant minority views are fairly and proportionately represented.⁶

Her colleague, Lorne Nystrom (NDP, Regina – Qu'Appelle), called SMP “outdated” and went on to speak about wasted votes. “Many Canadians vote for people who are not elected to the House of Commons because of the winner take all political system. If we had a system of PR people would be empowered and included because their votes would be reflected in the House of Commons.”⁷ Some form of PR would, in his view, “empower” voters and “force all political parties to have a national vision to knit and pull the country together.”⁸ Nystrom argues that a system combining single-member plurality ridings with proportional representation of parties, like MMP does, “are some of the things we should be considering in reforming and changing our electoral system and making it more fair, more just and more reflective of how the Canadian people vote.”⁹ Therefore, he essentially argues that these fairness intentions for what an electoral system is to provide should be reflected as key criteria in the fundamental assumptions for an election, much like proponents of MMP envision.

Nystrom continues by stating that an MMP system compensates for “vagaries and distortions in the electoral system” through a second ballot and, by combining the two

⁶ Edited Hansard, Number 017; 37th Parliament, 1st Session; Tuesday, February 20, 2001; 1010.

⁷ Ibid. 1025.

⁸ Ibid. 1025.

⁹ Ibid. 1030.

types of systems, gives voters “the best of both worlds.”¹⁰ In other words, he claims that the second ballot introduced by an MMP system, which enables voters to vote separately for both their preference of a local MP and for a party, creates “a system where people could vote for their first choice, vote for their philosophy, vote for the ideology” and that “their first choice and vision would be part of the Government of Canada and the Parliament of Canada.”¹¹ Nystrom believes that such a system “will allow the votes of every citizen to be treated as equal: all votes would be equal; all votes would carry weight; people could empower themselves; and there would be no wasted votes” and that “the irony of the present system is that often Canadians do not vote for their first choice.”¹² These citations illustrate another example of an assertion made in Parliament by an evident proponent of MMP that an electoral system should provide such features as envisioned (ones which are not achieved by SMP, or even considered in the concept of an election) – and, in these particular examples, also achieve both the second and third leading criteria introduced in the first chapter (those of limiting wasted votes as well as compromised voting) which underpin a “good” electoral system.

During the same discussion, MP Jason Kenney (Canadian Alliance, Calgary Southeast) conveyed his “new concept” view that the current system is outdated: “Canada is now the only multiparty advanced democracy in the world that still has a system of voting designed in and for 16th century England when candidates really were non-partisan

¹⁰ Edited Hansard, Number 017; 37th Parliament, 1st Session; Tuesday, February 20, 2001; 1055.

¹¹ Edited Hansard, Number 019; 37th Parliament, 1st Session; Thursday, February 22, 2001; 1700.

¹² Ibid. 1700.

candidates elected for the purpose of representation.”¹³ Kenney thus implicitly expresses his position that the concept of an election demonstrated by the current SMP system, which does not reflect modern-day realities, is no longer appropriate.

In the fall of 2004, at the beginning of the 38th Parliament, former NDP leader Ed Broadbent (NDP, Ottawa Centre) used his time during the debate in response to the minority Liberal government's Speech from the Throne to highlight the importance of addressing the electoral reform topic and to emphasize his longstanding advocacy of MMP. The Speech from the Throne had referred to the topic of electoral reform for the first time – something which he was pleased to finally see. In his remarks, Mr. Broadbent contended that an MMP system would see more women and minority representatives elected, limit wasted votes, and would contribute to a higher voter turnout. These positive possibilities arise under MMP largely because “the vote of every citizen, wherever that vote takes place, counts in some sense in shaping the government” (an aspect, seen in the concept of an election, which reflects the “new reality”) something that the SMP system “does not do.”¹⁴ In fact, he argued, “our present system is profoundly divisive, deeply harmful for national unity and alienating in its effect on broader participation throughout the land.”¹⁵ This is another instance of an argument being made in Parliament for MMP which reflects the different concept of an election held by proponents of such a system. This can be seen in how Mr. Broadbent recognizes that an MMP system (which combines the different concepts of an election of SMP and PR through using both single-member constituencies

¹³ Edited Hansard, Number 017; 37th Parliament, 1st Session; Tuesday, February 20, 2001; 1615.

¹⁴ Edited Hansard, Number 004; 38th Parliament, 1st Session; Thursday, October 7, 2004; 1340.

¹⁵ Ibid. 1340.

and compensation seats) will accomplish those positive outcomes listed.¹⁶ He proudly suggests that such goals as envisioned can accordingly be pursued through an MMP system but not through SMP (which reflects a concept which does not take such factors into consideration). Furthermore, as Mr. Broadbent's speech exemplifies, some MPs thus clearly see the value in these aspects achieved by this MMP kind of PR system.

In the spring of 2005, the Canadian House of Commons resolved itself into Committee of the Whole to debate the question of citizen engagement in the democratic process. In launching the debate on a motion “that this Committee take note of citizens’ engagement,” Hon. Mauril Bélanger, Minister responsible for Democratic Reform, noted that it is essential to involve parliamentarians in this process of democratic renewal and that the “take-note debate” planned for that evening would be an important way to “engage them in an examination of Canadian democratic institutions and practices.”¹⁷ During the debate, various MPs used the opportunity to comment on the purpose of an election, and the function of an electoral system, as they understood it. Opposition members, in particular, appeared determined to capitalize on the opportunity to steer the topic towards electoral reform – something which would benefit those smaller opposition parties at the expense of the over-rewarded winning government party. The bulk of the comments supported reform of the electoral system and, at least implicitly, reflected a concept of an election which is different from that found in the current system. Most points appear to have been made in an effort to convince others about the merits of these concepts shown by the alternative electoral system and possibly gain support for such

¹⁶ Edited Hansard, Number 004; 38th Parliament, 1st Session; Thursday, October 7, 2004; 1340.

¹⁷ Edited Hansard, Number 090; 38th Parliament, 1st Session; Tuesday, May 3, 2005; 1830.

views – which may contribute to eventual progress towards such change. The following comments implicitly show the views held by those particular MPs about what an election is to accomplish and what an electoral system is to provide (that is, their own concepts of an election are envisioned in these remarks).

Illustrating the possibility that Canadians espouse different concepts of an election is the contribution of Scott Reid, the Conservative MP for Lanark-Frontenac-Lennox and Addington, who praised the simple and straightforward attributes of the SMP system:

I want to mention one of the problems that seems to occur in systems other than our current system. Our system has the great virtue of extreme simplicity. We vote for a bunch of people and whoever gets the most votes wins, whether or not he or she has 50% of the votes. Just or unjust, it is certainly comprehensible. Other systems almost always wind up involving some level of complexity. Frequently they require vote allocations based on formulas ...¹⁸

In comparison, MP Ken Epp (CPC, Edmonton - Sherwood Park) both applauds and deplors the basic concept of an election reflected by the SMP system. He recognizes the value of its simplicity, but also claims that an electoral system should provide a way of recognizing the votes of those who did not vote for the single winning candidate:

Mr. Chair, the first past the post system is simple. The Deputy Prime Minister won by two votes.

There is a danger that those who voted for one of the other candidates, and particularly the people who voted for my friend who ran for our party, had some disillusionment. They had worked so hard. They tried so hard. They came so close, but received nothing.

There should be some way of recognizing the votes of the other people who did not vote for the candidate who won.

The person representing the riding should be the individual who received more votes than anybody else, even if it is a squeaker. If that person wins the race then he should receive the gold because he came in first. The other votes should then be allocated to, say, a provincial number and used for members at large to represent that point of view. That is the model I am leaning toward.¹⁹

¹⁸ Edited Hansard, Number 090; 38th Parliament, 1st Session; Tuesday, May 3, 2005; 2130.

¹⁹ Ibid. 2135.

In effect, Epp supports a “first-past-the-post” assumption for local ridings but also indirectly argues that additional votes for a party should go towards electing at-large MPs in the way prescribed by MMP advocates through the introduction of compensatory seats. Furthermore, in supporting the key criteria emphasized by the thesis as well as reflecting a concept of an election which recognizes such present-day concerns, Epp believes that improving proportionality and limiting wasted votes “would certainly engage more citizens in a meaningful way if, when they cast their ballots and expressed their ideas, they knew they would have a greater influence in the House of Commons.”²⁰

These examples demonstrate that many Members of Parliament – themselves successful in single-member plurality contests – are aware of the limitations and indeed the damage that the SMP electoral system inflicts on contemporary Canadian politics. The need for an electoral system, like MMP, that better meets the attributes of a “good” electoral system is provided for in these speeches.

SMP and Changed Political Realities

Many of the shortcomings of the current single-member plurality system arise because it does not pursue – let alone successfully achieve – the leading criteria for a “good” election presented in the first chapter. The criteria which have been emphasized are important aspects of an electoral system, but are not achievable under the current system due to the narrower concept of an election described in this chapter. The shortcomings of the current system may be attributed in part to the fact that the SMP system was never

²⁰ Edited Hansard, Number 090; 38th Parliament, 1st Session; Tuesday, May 3, 2005; 2135.

really designed but rather developed over time. Nor did it include a wider view of an election, one which sees a link between districts. The key criteria identified here – which are or should now be increasingly expected from a “good” electoral system – are largely unattainable under the present electoral system because they were not intended, or not yet thought of, in its structure and development. A different, less holistic, concept of an election was inherent. The fact that many modern day realities of elections are not present makes the concept of an election embedded in the single-member plurality electoral system outdated.

One primary reason for this changed situation of today is the emergence of political parties. Elections today are no longer merely local contests between individual candidates who, historically, entered the competition without significant partisan attachments or wider political perspectives. Instead, modern-day elections are competitions between parties running in many ridings with many candidates. It goes without saying that the rise and growth of nationwide parties is particularly significant in the operation of Parliament today and in the political life of Canada. Political parties today tend to adopt national or regional election strategies instead of those tailored to individual local ridings. Elections are now accordingly primarily team sports rather than individual sports. Where once the focus was on individual more-or-less independent candidates competing in local ridings, the reality today is that federal elections are nationwide struggles between and among political parties running many candidates in many ridings under some common banner. The primary objective is the overall success of the political party “team;” the game has clearly changed – but the rules under the current system have not.

The problem is that, although the SMP electoral system has belatedly recognized the place of political parties in the election system (through provisions for financial scrutiny, labels and the like), the core provisions of the system have remained intact. While the electoral system has remained stagnant, the game has clearly changed because of how parties have grown and changed in such a nationwide, “team sport” manner. Parties have long since adapted to these changing situations and acted accordingly. Moreover, it is generally accepted that most voters usually base their voting decision preeminently on their party preference rather than on their choice of the local candidates. The rules of the current electoral system clearly do not reflect this “new reality.”

Another fundamental reason for the “new reality” is the emergence and growth of nationwide mass media. Constituencies are accordingly no longer isolated in the way that they once may have been when print media was highly localized, as was the case at the time of SMP's introduction centuries ago. As a result, issues and events cut across more than only a single riding. Consequently, aspects of a wider scope, such as more proportionality in election results across all total ridings nationwide, are ingrained far more within the conscious of today's electorate and demonstrate new ways of thinking about an election (a “new concept”). Decisions to support particular candidates are largely shaped today by messages and assessments available across all ridings nationwide and delivered in a systematic way by a variety of means of communication. The idea that a federal election is a set of purely local decisions – driven by local information – is untenable anymore.

A third reason behind the “new reality” is the changing nature of the individual constituency in Canadian politics. Constituencies today have less of a central meaning to the population. Communities (particularly larger urban communities) have now been divided into a number of component parts – such as North Vancouver - Lonsdale, North Vancouver - Seymour, West Vancouver - Sunshine Coast, Vancouver - Point Grey, Vancouver Centre, Vancouver - Kingsway, etc. – in order meet the numbers needs of the electoral seat distribution process. Very few constituencies constitute a natural geographic area anymore. Accordingly, there often no longer exists the same communal ties between those within the same constituency that might have given meaning to a *local* decision. Yet the Canadian SMP system continues to assume that a series of local decisions is, in essence, what has happened in a federal election. This situation clearly justifies a movement away from the traditional constituency-centric concept of an election which is the paramount focus in the now outdated single-member plurality electoral system.

One other reality of modern Canadian elections is that there are now normally more than two parties routinely competing in each constituency, and thus the winner commonly achieves only a plurality of the votes cast rather than a majority. More votes for one candidate does not automatically mean a majority within a riding – something which the present SMP system fails to recognize in its concept of an election. This situation makes a plurality type of system less appropriate in the present day because more voters may have instead supported losing candidates under the electoral system due to its fundamental structure not reflecting this new reality.

In order to meet the criteria laid out in the first chapter, an electoral system must demonstrate a wider view of both what an election is to achieve as well as what an electoral system is to provide and it must reflect modern day realities – something which the outdated SMP concept of an election fails to do. Consequently, the current SMP electoral system deserves to be criticized for not reflecting this wider concept of an election and thus not being able to properly address many demands to the point which may lead to a growing belief that it needs to be reformed. For example, the democratic values criteria which were emphasized in the final report by the New Brunswick Commission on Legislative Democracy illustrate the growing importance that is being attached to such factors in the present day – showing new realities which increasingly need to be addressed by a “new concept” embedded within a new electoral system.

Elections therefore are clearly understood – and contested – differently today than they were in the nineteenth century when Canada implemented a single-member plurality electoral system. The structure and purpose of an election embedded in the current system clearly does not appreciate or reflect such changes to the nature of constituencies, parties, and election campaigns. As a consequence, the current SMP electoral system can be considered outdated. This lagging behind the times increases the justifications for arguments made in favour of change. It is about time that our electoral system, much like parties have done, also finally recognizes and reflects this “new reality” in its fundamental structure and rules – aspects which are based on the concept of an election.

Moreover, it has been shown in the thesis that SMP is inherently unable to meet the criteria for a “good” electoral system set out earlier due to incompatibility with the

vision of an election. First of all, since the main purpose and intention of an SMP election is to determine a single local representative, rather than paying attention to aggregate results and an accurate overall vote-to-seat allotment, the leading proportionality criterion is unattainable. Since it focuses solely on 308 individual district contests rather than the overall connection between them (the bigger picture) – thereby creating the potential problem of overrewarding winning and regional parties or underrewarding smaller and nationally-dispersed parties with more thinly spread out support – SMP is out of sync with modern party politics in Canada. Many votes are also “wasted” or “compromised” (the second and third leading criteria) under the current system because an election is premised on the narrow, local contest focus.

Such an outdated electoral system is accordingly less fitting of a system to still be in use today. Electoral system rules should follow suit with changing situations and get with the times. These new realities and ways of thinking, which are reflected through modernized concepts of an election like that seen in the MMP system, present new needs to be addressed through the structure and rules of an electoral system. Such a different view as described plus these new, emerging needs consequently means that changes to the electoral system, or even the implementation of a new system altogether, must be introduced in order to better reflect the current situation.

In contrast to the SMP system, MMP provides a different vision of an election. An MMP system for Canada could be designed in a manner that would achieve the central attributes of a “good” election system. The next chapter will apply the same leading

assumptions which underpin a “good” electoral system to the mixed-member proportional electoral system and will demonstrate how it is able to better achieve such criteria – mainly as a result of its wider, more comprehensive concept of an election introduced here.

The evaluation of these two respective electoral systems (provided both by the previous chapter as well as the next chapter) is linked through this chapter by the way in which one system is shown to reflect such new realities in its concept of an election while the other system clearly does not. As a result, it can accordingly be argued that reform from one of those two systems analyzed to the other is now essential in order to reflect the “new reality” that is introduced here in this chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

The MMP Electoral System and the Criteria

In this chapter, the criteria for a “good” electoral system are applied to the mixed-member proportional electoral system. The analysis will demonstrate that the three most important criteria underpinning an improved electoral system – more proportional election results, limited vote wasting and reduced compromised voting – are more attainable under an MMP system. This is possible primarily because MMP is based on a fundamentally different concept of an election which recognizes the “new reality” introduced in the previous chapter. As a result, an MMP system could be designed in a manner which specifically considers and tries to better achieve such central factors.

The mixed-member proportional system combines most of the positive features from both a single-member plurality system and from PR electoral systems while seeking to avoid many of the disadvantages of the two types of systems. The mixed-member proportional system combines the best of both worlds by having voters cast two ballots – one for a local candidate in a single-member constituency under the same procedures as SMP, and the other vote for a preferred party. Through combining the two electoral systems in this way, it embodies both the positive aspects of the single-member plurality system (chiefly greater stability and accountability) as well as a fairer translation of votes into seats that is more typical of proportional representation systems. Many of the problems attributed to the current electoral system would also be avoided, or at least reduced, by a mixed-member proportional system.

Criterion #1 – Proportionality

The principal strength of the mixed-member proportional system is that it better attains the most important criterion for an electoral system: higher proportionality. A mixed-member proportional electoral system increases fairness in terms of seat allocation through a more accurate translation of parties' respective vote share into seat share. The achievement of this leading criterion of proportionality is made possible because MMP reflects a focusing on the bigger overall picture of an election: seeing elections as having aggregative results. Improved proportionality is achieved through the distribution of compensatory seats. After the single-member district seats have been filled under an MMP system, additional seats are allotted to parties on the basis of some aggregation of the party vote in order to compensate for any disproportionality in the plurality constituency results.¹

An example of improved proportionality can be seen in the first election under an MMP system in Scotland in 1999. As a result of the compensatory regional seats, three of the four major parties received an aggregate percentage share of seats that was within two percent of their proportion of the overall popular vote in the election.² Most noteworthy is the experience of the Conservative Party, which did not win a single SMP district seat despite receiving 15 percent of the popular vote; however, an allocation of 18 compensatory regional seats by the MMP system meant that the Conservatives held 14 percent of the 129 seats in the Scottish National Assembly.³

¹ Nick Loenen, "A Case For Changing the Voting System and a Consideration of Alternative Systems," in Gibson, *Fixing Canadian Democracy*, 58.

² Jonathan Bradbury, *Devolution in Wales and Scotland and Recent Election Results*, (University of Wales Swansea, May 2005) : 3.

³ *Ibid.* 3.

Proportionality is also improved under an MMP electoral system through the introduction of a number of multi-member regional ridings. Regional MPs, elected on the basis of the second party ballot through the compensation seats, are added on top of those elected from the first SMP ballot in the current first-past-the-post manner. Not all districts are “winner-take-all” under MMP as they are under the current system. Rather than victory being given solely to the leading candidate in single-member ridings and all other parties gaining nothing in return for their votes, the mandate given by the constituents through their two ballots under MMP can instead be distributed among more than one candidate or party. The resulting arrangement consequently produces a more proportional aggregate election outcome. A party does not have to win a district outright to gain parliamentary representation and thus reflect the wishes of its voters. By eliminating disproportionality flaws inherent in the current electoral system, the mixed-member proportional system creates a legislature that more accurately reflects the actual level of voter support of the parties.

Criterion #2 – Effective Votes

The mixed-member proportional system also reduces the number of “wasted” votes, and therefore better meets this second leading criterion of a “good” electoral system. Under the MMP system’s calculation method, more votes matter since all of those cast in the second ballot (for a party) have a direct impact in determining the final election results and the composition of Parliament. Every party vote cast counts towards the final seat allocation, not only – as is currently the case under SMP – those votes cast for the single party that wins a plurality of votes in a riding. Rather than all votes in excess of the

plurality needed by a party for victory in a single-member first-past-the-post riding being superfluous, or any votes cast for a party which does not win the particular riding also being “wasted,” any votes for a party on the second ballot are still used to the party’s benefit under MMP’s more proportional calculation method because it will increase the number of compensatory seats gained by the party.

Furthermore, by wasting fewer votes, an MMP system can create a more positive feeling among the electorate: their votes now do in fact matter. This may consequently encourage more voters to turn out and exercise their franchise. For example, one study conducted by Andre Blais and Ken Carty in 1990 concluded that voter turnout averaged approximately 7 percent higher in countries with some form of PR that limited wasted votes.⁴ Much like many of its other positive aspects, the successful achievement of this criterion by the mixed-member proportional electoral system is largely a product of its advocates deliberately seeking to meet this criterion – in demonstrating a better recognition of the “new concept” identified in the previous chapter.

Criterion #3 – Minimizing Compromised Voting

While the single-member plurality electoral system may cause voting choices to be compromised, this problem is also reduced by the mixed-member proportional system since voters cast two ballots under that system. Voters consequently have an enhanced opportunity to express their true opinion in terms of both their choice of a local candidate and of the party they want to see in power. MMP therefore better meets this third criterion

⁴ Courtney, *Elections*, 148.

by reducing a need for compromised and possibly strategic, or “second-choice,” voting. With two ballots under an MMP system, the voter is not compelled to decide unequivocally in favour of a single party with only one vote, and is able to instead distribute his or her mandate support between two parties in the two different components of the election contest if he or she so wishes.⁵ This aspect of an MMP system is beneficial because voters may want to support a candidate but not necessarily that candidate's party, or vice versa, and can thus feel that their voting choice is being compromised under the current SMP system when they have to prioritize one such aspect at the expense of the other. A second nominal ballot under MMP significantly reduces the likelihood that some voters may feel a need to compromise their choice and possibly vote strategically rather than for their top preference.

The compensatory seat distribution aspect of MMP reduces the necessity for voters to defect from their first choice. Parties enjoy improved chances of gaining election to Parliament through the second ballot because the threshold for representation does not require a plurality; voters are thus less likely to believe that their top party choice has no chance of winning representation and should consequently feel less compelled to shift their vote to a more viable party rather than potentially waste their vote for their preferred party which may have essentially no chance of election with a plurality. In essence, voters are free to cast an uncompromised vote for their preferred choice without fear of it being wasted. Voters can instead recognize that every vote cast for their first choice party still helps it to increase its overall proportion of the popular vote, and therefore its share

⁵ Rae, *The Political Consequences of Electoral Laws*, 18.

of PR compensatory seat distribution. Such a system conveys more information about true voter preferences as a result of this reduced likelihood of compromised, or even strategic, voting. This marks an improvement in information over an electoral system in which voters cannot separately express their choices about candidates and parties.

Secondary Criteria

A mixed-member proportional system also meets many other secondary criteria besides the three leading assumptions that underpin a “good” electoral system. These include the way it limits artificial majorities, maintains clearly identifiable local representation in the single-member plurality ridings, addresses voter discontent, encourages higher voter turnout and participation, creates better chances for small parties and minorities to gain representation in the legislature, and provides more fair representation for parties in each region of the country. As explained at the end of the first chapter, these other benefits illustrate secondary positive aspects resulting as a ripple effect from the achievement of the three most important criteria for an electoral system. All of these other positive aspects attained will be covered in the next chapter through its analysis and evaluation of the outcomes from such a change to the MMP system.

Regardless of these many positive criteria successfully achieved by an MMP electoral system, it must also be recognized that no electoral system, including MMP, entirely achieves all of the assumptions underpinning a “good” electoral system. The mixed-member proportional electoral system is not a guaranteed fix-all solution – since one does not exist.

CHAPTER FIVE

Outcomes from Changing to a Mixed-Member Proportional Electoral System

This chapter will analyze the potential consequences of changing to an MMP electoral system in Canada. In particular, the challenge will be to determine whether such a change will make it possible to eliminate at least some of the problems currently prevalent under SMP. The flaws examined earlier in the thesis seriously undermine the current single-member plurality electoral system. This chapter dissects whether electoral reform would in fact prove to be beneficial in Canada – whether Canadian democracy would be enhanced by electoral reform, or if a change to an MMP system would amount to little more than institutional tinkering with no assurances to the Canadian electorate of an improved voting system.¹ Considering that no institutional change is ever neutral, the potential effects of electoral reform to a new system need to be understood as fully as possible before changes are implemented.² Since there exists a very real possibility for unintended consequences from system change, the need for caution is unmistakable.

In addition to the significant impact on the Canadian political system as a whole, the outcomes from electoral reform to an MMP system are important to consider because electoral systems also profoundly affect the way political parties: (1) respond to the electorate, (2) represent and mobilize opinion, (3) select campaign tactics, (4) develop as

¹ John C. Courtney, *Elections*, (Vancouver : UBC Press, 2004), 156.

² *Ibid.* 156.

organizations, and (5) organize government.³ Moreover, changing the electoral system has implications for longstanding traditions bearing on voting and governing.⁴

The chapter first analyzes the anticipated benefits from change to a mixed-member proportional electoral system and then moves on to concerns about the negative potential outcomes from such electoral reform in Canada and considers whether such fears are valid. The chapter concludes with an overall diagnosis of the positive and negative outcomes from a change to the mixed-member proportional electoral system which, because it embodies a wider concept of an election that reflects the “new reality,” better meets the criteria for a “good” electoral system.

An important underlying theme in this discussion is the question of why Canada has not abandoned the current SMP system, especially considering how the alternative better fits the notion of a “good” electoral system. It appears that one of the major dilemmas preventing the replacement of the current single-member plurality system of voting with another electoral system revolves around alternative perceptions of the flaws in the status quo and the strengths of a replacement. These perceptions, in turn, depend upon divergent concepts of what an election is intended to achieve.

The following outcomes derived from a change to a mixed-member proportional system are analyzed in terms of the capacity of such a system to meet important criteria

³ William P. Irvine, *Does Canada Need a New Electoral System?* (Kingston, Ontario : Institute of Intergovernmental Relations, 1979), 6.

⁴ *Ibid.* 6.

for a “good” electoral system. In turn, this potential is premised upon the way that the MMP system embodies a different concept of an election (a “new concept”). For example, results can be disproportional under the current single-member plurality system because there is no relationship between the separate contests in the different ridings and no attention is paid to the aggregate vote total in the concept of an election. In contrast, an MMP system assumes an association between the different ridings and can address the disproportionality problem because of the recognition of such a connection and an emphasis on aggregate results. A changed system will employ different methods of conducting an election since it is driven by other expectations of the election itself.

Positive Outcomes From a Change to MMP

The anticipated benefits over the current situation brought about by a change to MMP tie back to its reflecting a wider concept of an election. Most importantly, improved capacity to achieve the three leading criteria for a “good” electoral system – as well as the many other secondary beneficial aspects – can be anticipated as the outcome of such change. The most significant positive achievements under MMP would be the way in which seat distribution will be made more fair in relation to vote share, far fewer votes will be wasted, the compromising of voting choices will be minimized, artificial majorities will no longer be created, problems of regionalism (magnified by the current system’s over-rewarding of parties with regionally-concentrated votes) will be addressed, and smaller parties and minorities will have a better chance of gaining representation in Parliament. Additional probable benefits claimed by advocates of a mixed-member proportional electoral system include its potential to increase public participation and interest in elections, to create more compromise in Parliament due to an increase in

minority or coalition governments, to reduce voter dissatisfaction, to better serve all regions, and to contribute to higher voter turnout. Many of the secondary benefits to be discussed are, directly or at least indirectly, a positive result of the successful achievement of the three leading criteria by an MMP system.

The leading benefit of a change to an MMP electoral system is its capacity to increase fairness in terms of seat allocation – to achieve, in other words, the most important of all assumptions which underpin a “good” electoral system: greater proportionality. That term is understood to mean a more accurate translation of vote share into seat share by the electoral system. Under an MMP system, the proportion of seats received by a party in the legislature will more closely resemble its share of the popular vote. Unlike the current system, the MMP electoral system recognizes the problem of disproportionality and consequently addresses such SMP distortions through compensatory seats. In this way, one of the major problems with a “first-past-the-post” system – that of disproportional aggregate election results – can be resolved by an MMP electoral system. Since an MMP electoral system will translate votes into seats in a more proportional manner, the political parties will no longer be victim to the same significant discrepancies between them in the average number of votes received per seat awarded to them by the single-member plurality electoral system which is caused by either a lack or an abundance of pluralities won by the respective parties in single-member ridings. The composition of Parliament would more accurately reflect voters' wishes when proportionality is improved in such a way. Voters may gain a greater sense of trust in an electoral system that is seen to convert votes into seats in a more fair and accurate manner.⁵

⁵ Courtney, *Elections*, 158.

A related positive outcome generated by a mixed-member proportional electoral system is that wasted votes will be reduced. Under such a system's more proportional vote-to-seat calculation method, more votes will have a direct impact in determining the final composition of Parliament. Rather than all votes in excess of the plurality needed by a party for victory in a single-member, "first-past-the-post" riding being unnecessary for it to gain that parliamentary seat, any additional votes cast for a party through a second ballot will still be to the party's benefit since it will increase the party's seat percentage share higher of the total number of compensatory seats to be awarded. Similarly, votes cast for any party which does not win the particular single-member riding will no longer be wasted, as explained earlier, since any votes received by that party will increase its proportion of the overall popular vote and, hence, help it to gain a greater percentage share of compensatory seats under an MMP system. This reduction of wasted votes is thus better achieved through such a change to MMP.

Another positive outcome brought about by the achievement of improved proportionality is that the likelihood of an artificial majority government (one holding a majority of parliamentary seats without receiving a majority of the popular vote) will be substantially reduced under an MMP system. Since, for example, 40 percent of the vote is translated into a number closer to 40 percent of the seats (instead of into a majority government, as is commonly the case under the disproportional current SMP system), majorities would have to be earned through securing the support of a majority of the electorate rather than being manufactured through SMP's plurality rules. Admittedly, a more proportional system like MMP would not be completely free of distortion in the

allocation of seats and would still award some bonus number of seats to the leading party and penalize small parties to some extent, particularly due in to part to the retention of an SMP component in the overall election system.⁶ Nevertheless, the positive outcome is that the discrepancy between vote share and number of seats will be significantly less than under the current single-member plurality electoral system.

The preference for majority governments that are earned (actual majority rule), rather than manufactured by the electoral system's seat allocation method, is an important secondary criterion for a “good” electoral system because majority power in Parliament should not be awarded in this artificial way to a party which may be supported by substantially less than a majority of voters. The proponents of the more proportional MMP system recognize this problem in the SMP system and seek to remedy it through compensation seats for under-rewarded parties.

The paramount criterion of proportionality will also be improved if an MMP system in Canada increases the number of seats per electoral district in a number of regional districts, as was done in Scotland. With more than one seat to be allocated in some electoral districts, the election outcome is likely to more closely approximate proportionality between vote share and seat share.⁷ Rather than victory being given solely to the leading candidate in a “winner-take-all” single-member riding, the mandate given by the constituents of a multi-member riding under MMP will now instead be distributed

⁶ Douglas W. Rae, *The Political Consequences of Electoral Laws*, (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1967), 69.

⁷ *Ibid.* 139.

among more than one candidate or party and contribute to a more proportional outcome. Through multi-member compensatory seats, parliamentary representation is shared rather than monopolized by the party which may have only won a plurality of votes. The bonus seats won by the strongest party – those above its proportion of the popular vote – will similarly decline as district magnitude is increased. In these ways, a change to MMP would mark an improvement over the lack of proportionality inherent in the prevailing single-member districts of the current SMP system.

A greater number of parties will have an improved chance of having candidates elected, or will at least be more competitive, under a mixed-member proportional electoral system. A party will no longer be required to win a plurality of votes in a single riding in order to gain a seat in Parliament; in other words, the barrier to success (the threshold for election) will be lowered and smaller parties and independent candidates will have a greater chance of gaining parliamentary representation. This change may also bring an end to, or at least a reduction of, a psychological effect believed to exist in which some electors may not vote for smaller parties due to fears of that vote being wasted under the current “winner-take-all” single-member plurality system. Even larger parties with more widely-dispersed voter support will no longer have the same difficulty trying to cross a plurality electoral threshold which leads to their being under-rewarded in terms of seats under the current SMP system.

The electoral threshold is understood here as being the minimum proportion of votes which a party requires for election to Parliament. This threshold, which is a

plurality of votes under the current SMP system and can be considerably lower under the more proportional MMP system, is dependent upon the division of vote share among other parties and can therefore vary substantially. Extreme openness to new parties – if the electoral threshold is too low – may create disorder within Parliament, while extreme closure – which, it can be argued, exists under the current plurality system – denies representation to too many new parties because the barrier is too high.⁸ MMP succeeds in increasing the opportunities for smaller parties to win election while also preventing too large of a proliferation in the number of new parties in the legislature. This can be achieved through the way in which the MMP system customarily introduces a reasonable and appropriate minimum electoral threshold for the PR portion of an election. Five percent of the popular vote is a threshold which is commonly believed to be high enough to avoid a potentially destabilizing proliferation of parties gaining members in the legislature while still improving openness for a greater number of political interests to gain greater representation in Parliament.

Another key anticipated secondary benefit derived from a change to an MMP system is that such a system has the potential to reduce the impact of regionalism that is facilitated by the current SMP system. Since it is unlikely that predominantly regional parties will be able to form a majority government under a more proportional system, and considering that parties with regionally-concentrated support would no longer be over-rewarded in terms of seats, parties may instead be motivated to adopt a more nationwide focus in their platform and policies. A party will now have to appeal to a

⁸ Rein Taagepera. "Nationwide Threshold of Representation." *Electoral Studies*. Vol. 21. Issue 3. (September 2002) : 384.

wider portion of the country's population if it is to form a majority government. Parties would no longer have the same incentive to concentrate their efforts and resources on specific regions in order to try to capitalize on the over-rewarding of seats because, in contrast with a “first-past-the-post” system, every vote cast for a party through the second ballot will also have an impact towards a party’s seat share. Furthermore, if party list candidates for at-large regional positions were selected so as to be genuine provincial representatives, the allocation of compensatory seats could mean that the overall composition of the parliament would better reflect the distribution of votes among the parties in each province.⁹

Indeed, under an MMP system, the three major national parties are also less likely to be completely shut out of entire regions. This outcome could therefore reduce the regional alienation that has frequently emerged when a governing party lacks elected members in some regions. Better representation within the government for each region is a secondary beneficial attribute of a “good” electoral system because of its potential positive impact on reducing regional grievances and related feelings of exclusion from power. By providing a number of MPs which is more in line with a governing party's actual level of support among voters, particularly in regions where it is relatively weak in terms of seats under the current SMP system, the task of forming a more regionally-balanced Cabinet would be made easier.¹⁰ Because MMP improves the chance of a party winning seats in every region of the country, all parties could have a caucus that better represents the country as a whole. Since a party’s seats in different parts of the country

⁹ Irvine, *Alternative Electoral Systems*, 6.

¹⁰ Kent Weaver, “MMP is Too Much of Some Good Things,” in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 84.

would actually reflect the proportion of votes cast for it there, an MMP system could contribute to parties adopting a more truly national and integrative approach which sets out to appeal to more regions and represent a greater range of the diverse interests of the country's population. The current SMP electoral system systematically produces an overly regionalized Parliament and parties.¹¹ The improved possibility of winning seats throughout the country under an MMP system should also encourage parties to be less regionally divisive in their rhetoric.¹² Regionalism will inevitably still exist in Canada, but it may no longer be exacerbated as much by parties if they cede their capacity to capitalize on the plurality structure for their own electoral advantage. The potential to reduce the negative impact of regionalism caused by the current system's calculation method is one of many secondary aspects of a "good" electoral system which can be achieved by a change to a mixed-member proportional electoral system.

Another positive outcome from a change to MMP is that compromised or strategic voting will be reduced, though admittedly not eliminated. Under MMP, voters will have less reason to defect from their first preference because the required threshold for gaining parliamentary representation is significantly reduced.¹³ A larger number of parties will now have a more reasonable chance of winning representation in Parliament since a plurality of votes would no longer be necessary, and their supporters should consequently see less need to shift their vote to another party rather than potentially waste their vote for

¹¹ Archer et al., *Parameters of Power*, 385.

¹² Richard Katz, "Electoral Reform is Not as Simple as it Looks," in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 106.

¹³ Karp et al. "Strategic Voting, Party Activity, and Candidate Effects : Testing Explanations for Split Voting in New Zealand's New Mixed System." *Electoral Studies*. Vol. 21. Issue 1. (March 2002): 3.

their preferred choice which may have essentially no chance of capturing a plurality. Voters under an MMP electoral system will feel more free to cast an uncompromised vote for their preferred party choice without fear of it being wasted.

A related positive outcome from electoral system change is that permitting voters to cast separate ballots for a candidate and for a party will give them a greater range of options in determining who will represent them. Unlike the current electoral system, voters will be able to indicate their separate preferences in this regard if they so wish. An electoral system that allows voters to indicate their separate preferences about the parties and candidates is preferable to one that does not allow them to do so because such a system will convey voters' opinions and preferences more accurately.¹⁴ By extension, the more precisely voters are allowed to express their views on the ballot, the greater the likelihood that the government's overall composition will reflect what citizens want.¹⁵ The only notable defect in such a procedure in which two votes are cast rather than one is that some may believe it to be more complicated. Canadian voters, though, should unquestionably be capable of understanding a second ballot considering that voters in other countries where MMP has been introduced have proven entirely capable of doing so.

Each citizen also continues to have his or her own local constituency MP under a mixed-member proportional system. This is an important aspect because Canadian voters appear unlikely to accept an electoral system that would deprive them of having a local

¹⁴ Andre Blais, Canadian Study of Parliament Group, *Electoral System Reform : What are the Options?* (Ottawa, February 27, 2004), 3.

¹⁵ Andre Blais. "Criteria for Assessing Electoral Systems." *Electoral Insight*. Vol. 1. No. 1. (June 1999) : 6.

representative.¹⁶ Since some political concerns are often largely specific to a particular area, it is desirable to have a representative accountable to each area in order to ensure that those local concerns have a voice in government.¹⁷ Clearly identifiable local constituency representation has been a longstanding and fundamental tradition in Canada. Since voters under a mixed-member proportional system continue to elect their own local MP, the greater fairness through improved proportionality in overall election results would be attained without requiring any attenuation of local representation and therefore preserving the connection between MPs and their constituencies. An MMP system is the electoral system which comes the closest to achieving both the high local identifiability and accountability strengths of majoritarian or plurality systems as well as the high proportionality of PR systems.¹⁸ MMP largely follows Westminster traditions in many ways, such as keeping some plurality voting and local constituency representation. The concept of an election reflected by MMP recognizes the value of continuing to preserve traditional local representation in this form. It maintains some continuity with what we are familiar while also bringing about the benefits resulting from successfully achieving more of the criteria pertinent to a “good” electoral system. Therefore, another important secondary criterion of a “good” electoral system successfully achieved by the mixed-member proportional system is that, through the way in which at least half of the seats continue to consist of single-member plurality districts, it retains clearly identifiable local representation.

¹⁶ Henry Milner, “The Case For Proportional Representation in Canada,” in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 41.

¹⁷ Amy, *Behind the Ballot Box*, 13.

¹⁸ Matthew S. Shugart. “Electoral ‘Efficiency’ and the Move to Mixed-Member Systems.” *Electoral Studies*. Vol. 20. Issue 2. (June 2001) : 175.

An additional significant positive outcome from electoral reform is that replacement of the current SMP electoral system by MMP has the potential to provide a major way to reduce discontent among the electorate. The capacity of a first-past-the-post calculation method to produce “artificial” majority governments on a routine basis gives rise, along with the way in which votes may be “wasted,” to political disaffection. A perception among the public that their votes do not matter can contribute to voter cynicism and declining turnout. By reducing the proportion of wasted votes, a mixed-member proportional system can enhance the feeling among the electorate that their votes now do in fact matter. Potential voters would be given less reason not to cast their ballot because every single second ballot party vote would be seen as determining the final seat totals. Levels of voter interest and turnout should rise when the electorate sees an enhanced impact of their vote.¹⁹ For example, one study conducted by Andre Blais and Ken Carty in 1990 concluded that, all other things being equal, voter turnout averaged approximately 7 percent higher in countries with some form of PR (that limits wasted votes) than in those with SMP.²⁰ However, as the experience of New Zealand with MMP since 1996 (where turnout declined in the two subsequent elections – albeit largely due to a number of outside reasons such as an overwhelming favourite to win – after initially jumping slightly for the first MMP election) demonstrates, “an increase in turnout under proportional elections is not necessarily a 'done deal.'”²¹ Furthermore, the fact that every additional vote cast for a party will matter in determining its overall proportion of seats can also make elections more competitive in terms of its final results. Consequently, a change to MMP may provide a way of boosting public interest in elections. In addition to

¹⁹ Courtney, *Elections*, 148.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 148.

²¹ *Ibid.* 149.

increasing public interest by making election results more competitive, a mixed-member proportional system is also likely to increase voter turnout and citizen participation in part because a larger number of parties can be expected to compete (because of the improved possibility of gaining representation in Parliament) and, by extension, voters will be more likely to find a party which they find appealing.²² All that being said, since this question has also been subject to examination and written about by others, alternative explanations have also been provided for declining voter turnout besides that of dissatisfaction with the SMP electoral system. Louis Massicotte provides one such explanation by stating that voter turnout has declined in most democracies over the past two decades – including those with PR systems – and that declining turnouts can also “plausibly be traced to flagging trust in politicians and institutions among the Canadian public, a worldwide trend which became acute in the early 1990’s.”²³ Another possible reason for lower voter turnout can be a perceived lack of alternatives to the winning (often overwhelmingly so) government party, such as was largely the case for the federal Liberals in Canada during the 1990’s. The findings from a project by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) also illustrate that voter turnout (as well as statistics regarding the subject) is affected by factors other than the type of electoral system. The degree to which democracy is established within a country is one such key factor, as turnout rates have averaged substantially higher (73%) in established democracies than in non-established democracies (58%) over the post-war period.²⁴ Another such IDEA finding is that, after having risen steadily worldwide from 61% in 1945 to 68% by 1990,

²² J. Paul Johnston and Harold Jansen, “Elections and Electoral Systems,” in Brodie, *Critical Concepts*, 179.

²³ Louis Massicotte. “Changing the Canadian Electoral System.” *Choices: Strengthening Canadian Democracy*. Vol. 7. No. 1. (February 2001) : 7.

²⁴ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA); available at: www.idea.int/vt/findings.cfm.

voter turnout has dropped across the globe since 1990 back to 64% – thus showing a global pattern which is not specific to countries with an SMP electoral system.²⁵ It has also explained that factors such as regional wealth and literacy rate do not noticeably affect voter turnout – as can be seen by North America having the third lowest turnout rate as well as how countries with high illiteracy rates have similar voter turnout rates to highly literate countries.²⁶ Finally, comparison of voter turnout between countries is also harmed by inconsistencies among different countries regarding whether estimates of turnout are based on the voting age population numbers or on the registered electorate numbers. Nevertheless, for all of the above reasons, MMP better measures up to this secondary criterion – that of addressing voter apathy and discontent – of a “good” electoral system.

Another positive anticipated outcome from change to a mixed-member proportional electoral system is that legislative assemblies elected under such a scheme would better reflect the gender and racial composition of Canadian society at large.²⁷ This is an especially desirable feature of an electoral system for a country as diverse as Canada. Since Canada is an even more diverse and pluralistic society today than in the past, greater inclusiveness is a value that is increasingly necessary to fulfill. Minority representation is an important feature of a “good” electoral system because it promotes the protection of minority rights, ensures consideration of the views of minorities, and can foster a greater feeling of inclusion among minorities.²⁸ MMP's higher proportionality

²⁵ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA); available at: www.idea.int/vt/findings.cfm.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Courtney, *Elections*, 147.

²⁸ Amy, *Behind the Ballot Box*, 13.

through compensation seats improves the chances for candidates from traditionally underrepresented groups, such as women and minorities, to be elected. Admittedly, this increase may not be enormous because at least half of the MPs are still elected in the current first-past-the-post manner. However, a mixed-member proportional electoral system, which involves party lists, would create a greater opportunity for election to Parliament for women as well as for ethnic, linguistic, and other minority groups. Largely because of the difficulties surrounding the capturing of a single party nomination in each riding (as explained in the second chapter), MPs from such groups tend to come disproportionately from party lists since party lists can be designed to promote a level of gender, racial, and even age balance. Systems with party lists, like MMP, do have a much better record of electing women and minorities.²⁹ The mean percentage of women legislators in 1997 among advanced industrial democracies was 23.5% in countries with party lists while the mean was 16.8% in countries with SMP systems.³⁰ Most of the leading countries in the world in terms of share of women in parliament, such as the Nordic countries, currently have party lists.³¹ Rather than often being placed, or sacrificed, in single-member ridings where their party is not competitive, women and minority candidates would likely be seen as an asset to a party under an MMP system and placed on party lists in an attempt to present a “balanced ticket” and to attract women and minority voters.³² The existence of party lists creates incentives, and provides the opportunity, for parties to construct socially diverse lists in order to try to maximize the

²⁹ Heather MacIvor. “Proportional and Semi-Proportional Electoral Systems : Their Potential Effects on Canadian Politics.” *Electoral Insight*. Vol. 1. No. 1. (June 1999) : 14.

³⁰ Donley Studlar, “Will Canada Seriously Consider Electoral System Reform? Women and Aboriginals Should,” in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 129.

³¹ Therese Arseneau, “Electing Representative Legislatures : Lessons from New Zealand,” in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 141.

³² *Ibid.* 135.

likelihood of gaining the electoral support of a wider cross-section of the electorate.³³ Moreover, the multi-member regional districts in a mixed-member proportional system, such as the 7 per regional district under MMP in Scotland, would allow Aboriginals and other ethnic minorities the opportunity to increase the number of MPs sharing their background without incurring controversy about designated, guaranteed seats.³⁴ In general, the more members per district, the better the chance for election will be for minorities because there will be less struggle for a few prime places within each party's nomination list.³⁵

However, it must also be recognized that not all of the obstacles to the election of women, Aboriginal, and other minority candidates are entirely due to the first-past-the-post electoral system by itself. Institutional, historical, and political cultural norms and practices form part of the explanation. Political parties, even under an MMP system with party lists, will have to be committed to recruiting women and minority candidates, to placing those candidates high on the party lists and, once elected, to giving those MPs access to important posts.³⁶ Nevertheless, for the reasons provided here, the use of party lists in MMP electoral systems has opened the door to a far greater extent than under SMP and a change to MMP would significantly improve the prospects for such traditionally disadvantaged groups to gain a more equitable share of representation in Parliament. Therefore, meeting this secondary criterion of a "good" electoral system is another important contribution of MMP.

³³ John C. Courtney. "Plurality-Majority Electoral Systems : A Review." *Electoral Insight*. Vol. 1. No. 1. (June 1999) : 9.

³⁴ Donley Studlar, "Will Canada Seriously Consider Electoral System Reform? Women and Aboriginals Should," in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 130.

³⁵ Darcy et al, *Women, Elections, and Representation*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 741.

³⁶ Therese Arseneau, "Electing Representative Legislatures : Lessons from New Zealand," in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 144.

One final anticipated beneficial outcome of a change to a mixed-member proportional electoral system is that increased cooperation and compromise will likely exist in Parliament since minority or coalition governments would probably occur more frequently. Single-party majority governments frequently created under the current single-member plurality electoral system may justifiably be considered essentially an elected dictatorship. The operation of a first-past-the-post system, which commonly produces artificial single-party majorities, concentrates dominant power in the hands of the government party and gives basically no voice in governance to any of the other parties. An improved voice could potentially be gained if more compromise were necessary in order to pass legislation. Increased cooperation and compromise in Parliament is a desirable feature facilitated by a “good” electoral system because this contributes to greater inclusion of the views of more parties, and thus their supporters, in policies and legislation. Compromise becomes inevitable in an MMP system to the extent that the system makes it much more difficult for a single party to capture a majority of the national popular vote in an election. A winning party would have to actually receive close to a majority of the popular vote in order to form a majority government under an MMP system because of the more proportional conversion of votes to seats. The election of minority governments, which must take into consideration the ideas of other parties and make concessions in order to govern and pass legislation, provides an effective way to eliminate de facto elected dictatorships. An MMP system that translates, for example, 40 percent of the vote into roughly 40 percent of the seats in Parliament – rather than translating it into a majority of seats and hence essentially 100 percent of the political power, as the current SMP system does – can lead to the politics of greater inclusion,

partnership, negotiation, and coalition-building.³⁷ Coalition governments can also reduce the centralization of power in the hands of the government party since major decisions would require the approval of coalition partners and could not therefore be as easily imposed.³⁸ As a result, governments determined under an MMP system may display a greater sense of accommodation. More cooperation and the inclusion in government of a wider array of political interests is thus another important secondary attribute of a “good” electoral system that can be successfully attained through a change to MMP.

Having examined a number of positive outcomes anticipated from the implementation of a mixed-member proportional electoral system, the discussion now turns to a consideration of some potentially negative outcomes that may be associated with such a change.

Negative Outcomes From a Change to MMP

This second portion of the chapter exposes and evaluates a number of negative consequences that may result from adopting a mixed-member proportional electoral system. These negative potential outcomes demonstrate that several important criteria for a “good” electoral system may not be achieved, or may even possibly be made worse, by a change to an MMP system. The most significant negative aspects to consider are possible instability and reduced efficiency in government, confused accountability, the potential for a proliferation in the number of political parties, the possible creation of

³⁷ Nick Loenen, “A Case For Changing the Voting System and a Consideration of Alternative Systems,” in Gibson, *Fixing Canadian Democracy*, 56.

³⁸ Andre Blais, Canadian Study of Parliament Group, *Electoral System Reform : What are the Options?* (Ottawa, February 27, 2004), 5.

two different “classes” of MPs, necessary tradeoffs among different desirable elements between different electoral systems, longer and slower vote-counting, and potential coalitions of a composition which voters would not approve. The danger of unintended consequences from electoral reform cannot be overlooked. Yesterday's reform is often today's problem.³⁹ A change in the Canadian electoral system away from SMP will not necessarily eliminate all of the numerous problems explained in the second chapter, although it may nevertheless reduce many of them. A new electoral system creates challenges for both the electorate and the political parties, as voters have to learn how to operate the new system and the parties have to learn how to operate within it.⁴⁰ It is important to note that nearly all of the following arguments which are put forward about the negative outcomes from such change to MMP are subsequently refuted, and that these refutations contribute to the overall diagnosis of what a change to a mixed-member proportional system would accomplish in the search for a “good” electoral system.

Like all other electoral systems, MMP does not provide a guaranteed fix-all solution – since one does not exist. There is no such thing as a perfect electoral system. Incompatibilities exist between the many different criteria for fair and effective representation in a “good” electoral system; a system that satisfies one of our goals may inhibit others. Canadians want their electoral system to provide wide-ranging and somewhat contradictory results.⁴¹ While many are strongly attached to the oft-cited

³⁹ John C. Courtney. “Is Talk of Electoral Reform Just Whistling in the Wind?” *Policy Options*. Vol. 22. No. 6. (July-August 2001) : 17.

⁴⁰ R.J. Johnston and C.J. Pattie. “Campaigning and Split-Ticket Voting in New Electoral Systems : The First MMP Elections in New Zealand, Scotland and Wales.” *Electoral Studies*. Vol. 21. Issue 4. (December 2002) : 593.

⁴¹ Darrell Bricker and Martin Redfern. “Canadian Perspectives on the Voting System.” *Policy Options*. Vol. 22. No. 6. (July-August 2001) : 23.

benefits of the current SMP system, namely stability and efficiency, past surveys have indicated that fully two-thirds also support a more proportional approach like MMP.⁴² The choice of an electoral system is very much about determining which values or objectives are the more important priorities, such as the three leading criteria outlined earlier, and those which are less crucial.⁴³

Considering that Canadians want many conflicting things from a new electoral system – the best of all worlds – at least part of the promise of a new electoral system may be unattainable, and may in turn lead to public disappointment over unmet expectations.⁴⁴ For example, one cannot realistically expect that the party system will no longer be adversarial at all under an MMP system, although, as explained, more cooperation and consensus will likely be necessary in governing. We should not have unrealistic expectations from a new MMP electoral system, and it is important that we do not judge a new system as having failed because it is unable to achieve overly idealistic and possibly unattainable goals.

Like any other set of reforms, it is inevitable that there will be unanticipated and even undesirable, changes.⁴⁵ Some approaches to change may be too piecemeal, and not pay enough consideration to other areas where there might be an impact. Adjustment headaches, such as those created by a need to redraw district boundaries in order to accommodate the multi-member regional districts under an MMP system, will inevitably

⁴² Darrell Bricker and Martin Redfern. "Canadian Perspectives on the Voting System." *Policy Options*. Vol. 22. No. 6. (July-August 2001) : 23.

⁴³ Andre Blais. Canadian Study of Parliament Group, *Electoral System Reform : What are the Options?* (Ottawa, February 27, 2004), 6.

⁴⁴ Courtney, *Elections*, 158.

⁴⁵ Gordon Gibson, "The Fundamentals of Democratic Reform," in Gibson, *Fixing Canadian Democracy*, 10.

have to be endured during the early stages after change. One must recognize that there will be a transition period, which may be rocky, before the new voting system embodying a substantially different concept of an election – in line with the “new concept” – will become a smooth working part of our political life. This suggests the need to be patient with the new electoral system, and allow voters, parties, legislatures, and political systems time to adjust to such change. The early adjustment period can undeniably be discouraging, but it is not enough of a reason to immediately revert to the past single-member plurality system which does not meet the same leading criteria for a “good” electoral system. Judgment about whether the new MMP electoral system outcome has proven to be an improvement over the previous situation should not be passed on the basis of one single parliament, but rather should wait until after at least a few election cycles. Such assessment needs to wait to see how the new MMP system works after the early growing pains have been resolved. Since peculiarities can happen in any single election, an appropriate length of time is needed before the outcome of such change can be evaluated fairly.

The most highly feared outcome from a change to an MMP electoral system is the concern about unstable or ineffective governments becoming more routine in Canada. Such instability may undermine government effectiveness, say critics, especially if governments are forced to operate in situations of coalition government or to call elections frequently. Canada's past experience with minority governments strongly suggests that, if these became the norm under an MMP system, governments would likely be less durable.⁴⁶

Since Confederation, minority governments in Ottawa have lasted an average of

⁴⁶ Louis Massicotte. “Changing the Canadian Electoral System.” *Choices: Strengthening Canadian Democracy*. Vol. 7. No. 1. (February 2001) : 14.

20 months, compared with approximately 50 months for majority governments.⁴⁷ Much like minority governments, coalitions are also inherently more fragile than single-party majority governments and are consequently more likely to break up during the life of a parliament and/or lead to early elections.⁴⁸ Two reasons for this include: (1) when an unpopular decision has to be made, the junior partner is often tempted to withdraw support in the hope of escaping voters' vengeance and (2) when an unforeseen issue arises, coalition partners may find their respective positions irreconcilable and consequently dissolve their partnership.⁴⁹ Despite this, an encouraging feature is that at least most of the few examples of coalition governments in Canada – most of which have occurred at the provincial level – have lasted for the full life of a legislature.⁵⁰ For all these reasons, there is accordingly a balance to consider between greater consensus in governing versus effectiveness. It is undeniable that majority governments, which are common under the current electoral system, are at least usually the most stable and efficient in implementing legislation. In such situations, decisions can be made quickly since it is easier to reach agreement within a cabinet composed of those belonging to a single party.⁵¹ For many Canadians, such firm and decisive leadership produced is equated with good governance.⁵² A significant potential negative consequence of a move to MMP is what may be viewed as a tradeoff between heightened proportionality and the level of government effectiveness. More frequent minority or coalition governments, while being more representative of the

⁴⁷ Louis Massicotte. "Changing the Canadian Electoral System." *Choices: Strengthening Canadian Democracy*. Vol. 7. No. 1. (February 2001): 14.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 15.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 15.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 14.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 16.

⁵² *Ibid.* 17.

actual level of voter support, could possibly be subject to repeated deadlock and delay.⁵³ Such governments can be less responsive due to having reduced capacities without a majority of seats, and thus without a monopoly on power, in the legislature in making and adjusting legislation. Nevertheless, to see minority or coalition government as inevitable under a mixed-member proportional electoral system should not imply that the new parliament will therefore be unworkable.⁵⁴ Many such governments have turned out to be highly stable and effective. For example, Lester B. Pearson is considered by many to have been one of Canada's most successful Prime Ministers while only having minority government situations. Elsewhere, Germany – a country which uses a mixed-member proportional system, and has subsequently frequently had minority or coalition governments – is widely considered to have had the best record of government stability in all of Western Europe over the period since it adopted MMP. Moreover, recent literature conveys doubts about the governance advantages that supposedly derive from single-party majority governments.⁵⁵ Governments on the whole are more stable and durable under a majority situation, but there is no clear evidence that this results in better governance outputs.⁵⁶ Arend Lijphart, in providing one example, has challenged the conventional thinking that assumed the existence of a trade-off between accurate representation and good governance by presenting evidence that PR countries do not perform worse than countries with plurality systems on a number of key indicators.⁵⁷ His findings are based

⁵³ Irvine, *Alternative Electoral Systems*, 12.

⁵⁴ Irvine, *Does Canada Need a New Electoral System?*, 70.

⁵⁵ Louis Massicotte. "Changing the Canadian Electoral System." *Choices: Strengthening Canadian Democracy*. Vol. 7. No. 1. (February 2001): 17.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 17.

⁵⁷ Arend Lijphart. "Democracies: Forms, Performance, and Constitutional Engineering." *European Journal of Political Research*. Vol. 25. No. 1. (January 1994): 12.

on analysis of 36 stable democracies, small and large, while the conventional wisdom commonly focused excessively on a few large and dysfunctional PR countries.⁵⁸ Lijphart determined that on important economic indicators like economic growth, inflation, and unemployment, countries with plurality systems do not, on average, outperform PR countries.⁵⁹ “Majoritarian governments,” he writes, “may be able to make decisions faster than consensus governments, but fast decisions are not necessarily wise decisions.”⁶⁰ In another such example, from analyzing the workings of minority governments in 15 democratic countries over the period from 1945 to 1987, Kaare Strom has also concluded that “contrary to conventional wisdom, minority governments do not perform particularly poorly in office. While minority governments are less durable than majority coalitions, they fare better at the polls and resign under more favourable circumstances. [They] perform best in those political systems where they are most common, and least well where they are most rare.”⁶¹ Furthermore, while increased proportionality in the legislature would likely make governments more fragile, this may be what Canadians actually want, especially if this means that governments are consequently more willing to listen and compromise.⁶² Finally, single party majority governments, and the effectiveness they usually enjoy, are still possible under a mixed-member proportional system. The key difference is that they must instead actually be earned more by receiving at least closer to

⁵⁸ Louis Massicotte. “Changing the Canadian Electoral System.” *Choices: Strengthening Canadian Democracy*. Vol. 7. No. 1. (February 2001) : 17.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 17

⁶⁰ Arend Lijphart. “Democracies: Forms, Performance, and Constitutional Engineering.” *European Journal of Political Research*. Vol. 25. No. 1. (January 1994) : 12.

⁶¹ Kaare Strom, *Minority Government and Majority Rule*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 238.

⁶² Louis Massicotte. “Changing the Canadian Electoral System.” *Choices: Strengthening Canadian Democracy*. Vol. 7. No. 1. (February 2001) : 15.

a majority of the popular vote. This concern for instability and inefficiency under a changed system is thus not entirely valid.

In a related concern, some may also fear possible instability and ineffectiveness resulting from a potential increase in the number of parties encouraged to compete under the more proportional MMP electoral system. This proliferation may include numerous parties with “specialized” interests (for example, a Toronto party) rather than broader, nationwide orientations. A major concern is that such a situation of a legislature containing many different highly specialized parties can be harmful to integration. That possible price to such an integration question is highly salient in a heterogeneous and regionally-divided country like Canada. For example, since coalition governments consisting of multiple parties are highly feasible under this more proportional electoral system, and if instability and inefficiency are a result as feared, separatists – much like any of a number of other special interest parties elected to Parliament – may very well be part of a stalemated federal government. This provides something to which they can consequently point and complain of Ottawa's dysfunctional politics (and use to support the argument in favour of separation) – thereby harming, rather than helping, integration and national unity. Like several other potential negative outcomes introduced in this chapter, this particular concern is one which will in fact remain if electoral system change is implemented. Most feared outcomes are refuted here while a few are not. Nevertheless, having acknowledged this and other possibilities, the “risk-reward” ratio from such electoral system change to MMP in Canada is deemed to be worth it – especially when one considers the arguments made in the thesis that the benefits (including the achievement

of all three leading criteria for a “good” electoral system) substantially outweigh the feared negatives, and that most of those particular concerns about negative outcomes are even eased.

Another negative potential outcome from changing to MMP is that voters may be confused by the existence of two sets of rules which translate their votes into seats, and that such confusion may discourage participation and/or possibly produce results that are not consistent with voters' preferences. If so, MMP would actually fail to achieve these two goals that are central to its proponents' concept of what an electoral system is to provide.⁶³ This situation may particularly be a problem during the period immediately after a new MMP electoral system has been introduced.⁶⁴ Concern can exist about voters possibly not knowing enough about and therefore being confused by a new electoral system, and this can consequently cause a distortion of election outcomes. Split-ticket voting may also be partly a result from such misunderstanding of mixed electoral systems in which voters can choose to simultaneously support different parties with each of their votes.⁶⁵ For example, in New Zealand's first election under MMP in 1996, 37% of the electorate – a number which is substantially higher than is common among German voters, who have had a long time to become familiar with their MMP system – split their vote by casting their party vote for one party and a district vote for a candidate of a different party.⁶⁶ However, split-ticket voting is not necessarily a negative measure

⁶³ Karp et al. “Strategic Voting, Party Activity, and Candidate Effects : Testing Explanations for Split Voting in New Zealand’s New Mixed System.” *Electoral Studies*. Vol. 21. Issue 1. (March 2002): 2.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 2.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 2.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 3.

or principally the result of voter confusion, as voters may have been utilizing the mixed system to articulate a greater range of choices, for example to endorse a local candidate without necessarily supporting that candidate's party. Consequently, this is once again another factor which is shown here to not be as serious of a problem as some opponents of change to MMP might try to claim, but rather another positive outcome which Canadian voters would also be able to enjoy if an MMP system is introduced.

A concern frequently expressed about MMP is that, in contrast to the simple and speedy vote-counting procedure under the current SMP electoral system, it may take longer to finish counting the votes and determining the final allocation of corrective PR regional seats. This difference arises because, instead of focusing solely on determining individual riding winners, MMP employs two separate ballots and seeks to reflect aggregate results. Simple and speedy vote counting is a beneficial aspect of a "good" electoral system because both the public and politicians know the outcome sooner and there will be less uncertainty about the final results. Nevertheless, that being said, it is important to realize that elections in Wales and Scotland since the adoption of MMP in 1999 have gone smoothly and the final results have been known quickly. Election results have also been determined promptly in New Zealand under the MMP electoral system which was adopted in 1996. As those cases plainly illustrate, the change to a new voting system has not created a vote counting procedure that is too complicated to use or that takes too long to determine final results. Clearly the fears about and predictions of prolonged counts are thus largely unfounded.

Another often-heard criticism is that change to a mixed-member proportional electoral system could potentially lead to a far greater number of political parties in the Canadian Parliament since a plurality of votes in a riding would no longer be needed by a party as the only way to capture a seat. The increased ability for more parties to gain a place in parliament under an MMP system relates back to the concept of an election demonstrated by MMP (which recognizes that elections are competed between parties running many candidates in many districts), in contrast to the SMP view of elections as being competed solely between candidates competing for a plurality of votes in a local single-member district. As a result of this wider view of an election, which reflects the “new concept,” the fundamental structure and functioning of the MMP system accordingly facilitates the growth of parties through higher proportionality in election results and a more easily surmountable electoral threshold. This result of more parties securing seats within the legislature need not be a drawback since the greater the number of parties being encouraged to compete – largely in response to improved prospects for gaining seats in Parliament – the more choices this means for voters. In addition, concerns about a proliferation in the number of parties in Parliament should not be overstated since existing mainstream parties would likely be able to maintain much, if not all, of their support and voting strength under the new electoral system. Any potential proliferation in the number of parties will also be limited because at least half of the seats would continue to require a plurality of votes in a single-member district. Furthermore, the potential proliferation of parties can be controlled through introducing a minimum electoral threshold such as one which is commonly set at five percent of the popular vote in most cases of an MMP system.

Another significant negative potential outcome from change to a mixed-member proportional electoral system is a concern that greater proportionality may entail a reduction in effective local representation. Many fear that representatives who are elected in multi-member districts or in compensatory seats under an MMP system may be less in touch with constituencies than are local representatives elected under the single-member plurality method. Such elected officials themselves may be uncertain about whether they ought to be primarily responsible to the constituents in their multi-member regional district or instead primarily to their own party whose list they were selected from. This may negatively affect the quality of local representation by elected representatives. There is also the possibility for political parties to abuse the at-large aspect of MMP elections by smuggling through their own preferred candidates who are defeated in their own ridings, but are nevertheless elected to office because their parties place them high on their list.⁶⁷ Some observers refer to these individuals as “zombie politicians.” Such an occurrence has been common under MMP in Japan.⁶⁸ This potential harm to local representation under an MMP system does not necessarily occur, however. Voters are still able to decide exactly which candidates are elected in the SMP ridings. Consequently, candidates will still have to work hard to try to earn every possible vote. Voters in multi-member regional districts will also have more than one person representing them, and therefore more than one representative to turn to for help.⁶⁹ In addition, since a multi-member regional district is likely to elect members from different parties in closer proportion to the vote results,

⁶⁷ Palmer, Vaughn. “Citizens’ Assembly, meet Tom Berger; Mr. Berger, meet ...,” *Vancouver Sun*, June 12, 2004, p. A3.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p. A3.

⁶⁹ Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform, *Making Every Vote Count : The Case for Electoral Reform in British Columbia*. Vancouver. Final Report : December 2004. p. 6.

voters will be more likely to have the option of going to an MP who more closely shares their political views.⁷⁰ Having multiple MPs within ridings through the compensatory seats may also actually be viewed as enhancing, rather than harming, local representation under an MMP system because it can create a form of competitive “market” between the different representatives. All individual MPs under this competitive system, thinking towards the next election campaign, will want to be recognized as taking an active role and representing their constituents better than other members. Parties would also be able to assign some of their MPs from compensatory seats to provide extra representation work for constituents, such as helping with constituent relations in ridings where their party did not win a local seat or possibly to liaise with particular population segments.⁷¹ This suggests that the secondary criterion of effective local representation – another desirable feature of a “good” electoral system – can still be achieved under MMP.

Next, the possibility exists that a mixed-member proportional electoral system will create what may be considered two different “classes” of MPs: those elected in individual constituencies and those chosen from party lists to fill the compensatory seats. This is an aspect to consider in an evaluation of a “good” electoral system because of the potential negative impact which such a perception may have on the criterion of effective and clearly identifiable local representation. The MP directly elected by local voters, largely due to our traditions, may be viewed as having greater importance and legitimacy. The at-large regional district list members, on the other hand, who primarily owe their

⁷⁰ Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, *Making Every Vote Count : The Case for Electoral Reform in British Columbia*. Vancouver. Final Report : December 2004. p. 6.

⁷¹ Fair Vote Canada, *Make Every Vote Count : This is Democracy?* Toronto. May 2005. p.6.

position to the party list makers, may view themselves as having essentially no specific constituency obligations. The party lists will likely produce a number of absolutely safe at-large positions to which some, particularly ministers, might gravitate precisely in order to be freed from the risks and responsibilities of representing an individual constituency.⁷² This may also cause the at-large members to be viewed as “second-class” MPs and possibly be branded as “the privileged few who have little constituency work to do.”⁷³ For example, gauging from postal surveys of all MPs – both local and regional – conducted in 2002 and 2004, it can be seen that many of the local constituency MPs in Scotland, particularly those from the Labour Party, judge the local roles of the at-large members to be inadequate.⁷⁴ All of this is in spite of the Presiding Officer in Scotland having established “a principle of equality of status between constituency and regional members” while nevertheless having drawn up guidance that prescribed behaviour.⁷⁵ The Economic and Social Research Council notes that “in essence, inside the Parliament all members are equal but outside differences are recognised(sic) in the workload and allowances of constituency and regional MSPs” since regional members are to properly identify themselves as such, to prove that they have offered local constituency representation, and have received reduced allowances in many instances – thus demonstrating what may be considered by some to be implicit “second class” treatment.⁷⁶ However, once again, such a potential negative factor need not be a problem, and there need not be two tiers of

⁷² Richard Katz, “Electoral Reform is Not as Simple as it Looks,” in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 105.

⁷³ Louis Massicotte. “Changing the Canadian Electoral System.” *Choices: Strengthening Canadian Democracy*. Vol. 7. No. 1. (February 2001) : 7.

⁷⁴ Economic & Social Research Council, *Learning to Live with Pluralism? Constituency and Regional Members and Local Representation in Scotland and Wales*. Devolution Briefing No. 28. Edinburgh, Scotland. March 2005. p. 1.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 2.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 2.

MPs created, if all MPs are given substantial and clearly defined responsibilities by their party or by the government.⁷⁷ The potential problem of two tiers of MPs can be avoided by providing equality of spending allowances and important government positions to both groups of MPs. As Louis Massicotte has observed, “how the two categories [of potentially “warring” MPs] would interact cannot be predicted with absolute certainty, but it is worth pointing out that in the two dozen countries with mixed systems, no tensions are reported.”⁷⁸ Even in the Scotland case highlighted here, the ESRC study notes that there appears to have been a growing acceptance over time by MPs of the existing arrangements.⁷⁹ Massicotte also comments that, in actual practice, “there is little to substantiate that perception” (also seen by some in New Zealand) of PR members as being “second class” MPs.⁸⁰

A related problem created by multi-member regional districts under an MMP system is that the competition which inevitably will result between the different groups of MPs may become serious enough to cause dysfunction. Such tensions may harm productivity and local representation. The competitive nature of the relationship may lead to tensions rather than to the full acceptance, cooperation, and mutual respect between MPs as envisioned by reformers.⁸¹ Strained relations between MPs within a regional riding

⁷⁷ Heather MacIvor. “Proportional and Semi-Proportional Electoral Systems : Their Potential Effects on Canadian Politics.” *Electoral Insight*. Vol. 1. No. 1. (June 1999) : 15.

⁷⁸ Louis Massicotte. “Changing the Canadian Electoral System.” *Choices: Strengthening Canadian Democracy*. Vol. 7. No. 1. (February 2001) : 13.

⁷⁹ Economic & Social Research Council, *Learning to Live with Pluralism? Constituency and Regional Members and Local Representation in Scotland and Wales*. Devolution Briefing No. 28. Edinburgh, Scotland. March 2005. p. 1.

⁸⁰ Louis Massicotte. “Changing the Canadian Electoral System.” *Choices: Strengthening Canadian Democracy*. Vol. 7. No. 1. (February 2001) : 13.

⁸¹ Economic & Social Research Council, *Learning to Live with Pluralism? Constituency and Regional Members and Local Representation in Scotland and Wales*. Devolution Briefing No. 28. Edinburgh, Scotland. March 2005. p. 1.

is even more likely if the MPs come from different political parties. Another potential problem caused by having multiple MPs in ridings is duplication of effort. In thus conceivably not meeting the effectiveness feature of a “good” electoral system, MPs may waste time and effort, as well as resources, chasing and responding to constituent cases that are already being dealt with by other representatives.⁸²

One final argument about potentially negative outcomes of a change to the mixed-member proportional system is that voters may have no say in the composition of coalition governments which will likely become more common. Coalitions are often the outcome of backroom negotiations.⁸³ This may cause many to argue in favour of the current single-member plurality electoral system since it usually produces single-party majority governments. The partnering party which is truly responsible for particular government legislation may be less clear under situations of coalition government, and this may therefore contribute to reduced or confused accountability. MPs, or even entire parties, may also possibly abandon their own party platform in order to form a coalition. In these ways, a change to MMP – a system which makes coalitions more likely – may consequently reduce the likelihood of achieving high identifiability and accountability (both desirable secondary features of a “good” electoral system). Majority government parties and single-member constituencies under the current system do at least undeniably provide clearly identifiable local and federal accountability, and let voters know exactly which party to

⁸² Economic & Social Research Council, *Learning to Live with Pluralism? Constituency and Regional Members and Local Representation in Scotland and Wales*. Devolution Briefing No. 28. Edinburgh, Scotland. March 2005. p. 4.

⁸³ Andre Blais. Canadian Study of Parliament Group, *Electoral System Reform : What are the Options?* (Ottawa, February 27, 2004), 5.

reward or punish for each particular piece of legislation. A more common concern is that minority governments may sometimes invite fringe parties into a coalition in order to try to form a majority to pass legislation. Minor, possibly fringe, parties may hold the balance of power in Parliament more often under the more proportional MMP system. These small swing parties will likely want rewards in return for their support of the government, possibly in the form of having their views promoted, government funding for their cause, and the gaining of disproportionate influence. However, this fearful argument is only partly valid. It is true that parties can decide coalitions without direct input from the voters, but the voters at the next election can punish parties which formed coalitions that they oppose.⁸⁴ As a result, it will be in the parties' interests to anticipate voters' reactions, and the formation of coalitions will therefore probably be affected by public opinion.⁸⁵ Parties will have to defend their coalition deals to the electorate. Coalitions are also more formal, and can therefore be held more to account than mere "bargains."⁸⁶ Furthermore, governments even under the current SMP system are in fact coalitions of different factions negotiated and formed within the parties, generally hidden from public view.⁸⁷ Consequently, the more frequent appearance of coalition governments under an MMP electoral system need not be feared.

With both the positive and negative outcomes to anticipate from electoral reform in Canada to an MMP system now explained, the last part of this chapter provides an

⁸⁴ Andre Blais. Canadian Study of Parliament Group, *Electoral System Reform : What are the Options?* (Ottawa, February 27, 2004), 5.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 5.

⁸⁶ Irvine, *Does Canada Need a New Electoral System?*, 77.

⁸⁷ Fair Vote Canada, *Make Every Vote Count : This is Democracy?* Toronto. May 2005. p. 5.

overall diagnosis of the relative weights of both sides of the issue regarding change to the mixed-member proportional system which, as has been made clear, better meets the criteria emphasized for a “good” electoral system as a result of its wider concept of an election.

Final Diagnosis of Outcomes

The positive aspects of a change to a mixed-member proportional system significantly outnumber and outweigh the few positive criteria attained by the current single-member plurality electoral system. The capacity for a mixed-member proportional electoral system to reflect a wider – and more credible – view of the nature of an election and what an electoral system is expected to provide today (in line with new realities), is more compelling than the successes currently prevalent under the single-member plurality system. The leading positive factors of the SMP electoral system – and which would remain in place if there is no electoral reform – are its relative simplicity, familiarity, quickly determined final election results, and clearly identifiable local constituency representation. Despite those limited positive aspects of the SMP system, change to MMP will prove to be beneficial because it better meets the three most important criteria which underpin a “good” electoral system: (1) increasing proportionality in election results, (2) limiting “wasted” votes, and (3) minimizing compromised voting choices. In addition, MMP achieves the many secondary criteria that were introduced earlier and deemed to be important. These are the most obvious successes that a change to a mixed-member proportional electoral system will achieve; moreover, they outweigh any potential negative results that may be detected. A change to a mixed-member proportional system will benefit the Canadian electorate.

A fundamental reason why the benefits from change to MMP outweigh the negatives is that such change can directly remedy the shortcomings of the current system. MMP embodies the “new concept” view that an electoral system should consider the bigger overall picture and calculate the overall aggregate result from an election. A mixed-member proportional system considers the election winner to be the party with the greatest overall total of votes in all districts combined, and not merely the party which wins a plurality of votes in the greatest number of individual districts as SMP does. Each riding is not treated as entirely independent from one another, as is the case in the current SMP system, but rather assumes that all of them are inherently part of the final overall election result. An improved electoral system is one that captures the nature of modern political parties, the mass media and campaigning – the “new reality.” The way in which these characteristics that encapsulate the most important attributes of a modern election are reflected in the design and foundation of an MMP electoral system illustrate that such change to this system will prove beneficial.

Indeed, nearly all of the leading positive factors possessed by the current single-member plurality electoral system can also be achieved to at least some extent by such a change. Therefore, the positive criteria attached to the current SMP system can be maintained by the changed system, while also bringing about the numerous benefits associated with a mixed-member proportional system and its wider concept of an election. First of all, voting under the mixed-member proportional system is only slightly more complicated than under the current single-member plurality electoral system. Voters under an MMP system merely cast two nominal ballots rather than one. The relative

simplicity enjoyed under the current single-member plurality electoral system thus will likely not be lost to any significant extent if there is a change to a mixed-member proportional electoral system. MMP also maintains a quick and straightforward vote counting technique. This marks another important secondary trait of the current single-member plurality system; MMP can therefore achieve that goal while also fulfilling far more of the other criteria. Finally, a mixed-member proportional system retains clearly identifiable local constituency representation. This is made possible since voters continue to elect their own local MP in one portion of the election, thus maintaining some continuity with the familiar SMP provisions. The changed electoral system successfully balances these key principles of improved proportionality and traditional constituency representation. Complete familiarity and tradition are therefore the only notable positive criteria that the current single-member plurality system can boast, qualities that can be achieved to at least a comparable level by a mixed-member proportional electoral system.

Therefore, the overall diagnosis presented here is that the criteria introduced for evaluating a “good” electoral system – which are successfully achieved by a mixed-member proportional system – are more crucial than those limited positive criteria which are prevalent under the current single-member plurality electoral system. An MMP electoral system can nevertheless also achieve nearly all of the positive qualities of the SMP system. The anticipated benefits from changing the electoral system to MMP therefore substantially outweigh the feared negatives from such change. The critical element that leads to the success of one system and the flaws in the other is the way in which these respective electoral systems reflect different fundamental concepts of an election.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

In this thesis, criteria for evaluating a “good” electoral system have been analyzed and have been used to evaluate the single-member plurality and mixed-member proportional electoral systems. The primary research question has been: “Do the proponents of the single-member plurality and mixed-member proportional electoral systems assume different concepts of an election?” The answer to this question is “Yes.”

The principal supplementary questions addressed in the thesis discussion include:

- what are the concepts of an election implicit in the SMP and MMP electoral systems?
- how are these concepts different from each other and what impact does this have?
- which criteria are the most important for a “good” electoral system?
- how well do the respective systems meet these major assumptions of a “good” electoral system?
- what are the principal problems with the current SMP electoral system that stem from its conceptualization of an election and how have they inspired the pursuit of electoral reform?
- how can these principal problems be addressed?
- what are the outcomes from change to a system like MMP that reflects a different concept of an election and better meets the criteria for a “good” electoral system?
- what are the problems related to such electoral system change?
- do the benefits from such electoral system change outweigh the negatives?
- how has the nature of elections changed in Canada since the introduction of SMP
- do the respective systems sufficiently recognize this “new reality”

The thesis began by evaluating and ranking the leading criteria for a “good” electoral system. It is important to define the values which we as Canadians want reflected in an electoral system as well as the relative importance of our different goals. The three most important criteria were identified and applied to the respective electoral systems. These leading assumptions consist of, in order of significance: (1) fair and accurate translation of votes to seats, (2) limiting “wasted” votes, and (3) minimizing compromised voting. The thesis has also demonstrated why the other factors are less imperative. Paramount among these reasons for this lower importance is that the other factors can already be achieved anyway as “ripple effect” secondary benefits of the leading criteria. Both electoral systems are evaluated in subsequent chapters in terms of how well they meet these three leading criteria above all other secondary measures.

The thesis then applied these leading assumptions for a “good” electoral system to the current single-member plurality, or “first-past-the-post,” system and identified and explained the fundamental problems which result from the concept of an election embedded in that system. The analysis diagnosed the present system as failing to meet many of the criteria argued to be the most important for measuring a “good” electoral system. Notable shortcomings of SMP include an inaccurate conversion of vote share into seat share, a high number of “wasted” votes, a potential need to compromise voting choices, the creation of artificial majorities, the possibility for “wrong winners,” the over-rewarding of winning parties and regional parties, the under-rewarding of small parties, and causing voter disaffection which can contribute to declining voter turnout. The evaluation demonstrates that the key criteria for a “good” electoral system are largely

unattainable under the present SMP electoral system because such attributes were not anticipated in its structure and development. A different, less holistic, and now outdated concept of an election was assumed. The largely inter-connected problem areas within the current system have been investigated as a way of determining how they have inspired calls for electoral reform.

Moreover, the most positive attributes achieved under SMP do not embody any of the three leading assumptions which underpin a “good” electoral system, but include its simplicity, familiarity, and tendency to produce efficient governments. The positive features of the present system appear to have caused much of the population to be reluctant to make changes and have therefore impeded electoral reform in Canada.

The third thesis chapter illustrates the significant features of both the current single-member plurality and the mixed-member proportional system and explains the highly different ways in which the respective systems conceptualize an election. The advocates of the current single-member plurality electoral system view a federal election as essentially 308 separate constituency contests in which the results are entirely independent from one another. The idea that there should be a proportional conversion of vote share into seat share is not a goal of an SMP electoral system. In contrast, proponents of the mixed-member proportional system look at the larger overall picture in their conceptualization of an election. MMP reflects the view that elections are contests between numerous parties running candidates in many ridings which all relate to one another in contributing to the final election result and the belief that an electoral system

should produce a roughly proportional final election outcome across all ridings. These conflicting concepts of an election are a determining factor in whether the respective system meets the different criteria and, as a result, whether it can be considered a “good” electoral system. Finally, Chapter Three has also introduced a “new reality” regarding how an election is perceived today as well as how this impacts whether the concept of an election reflected by the particular system is up-to-date and, consequently, if the electoral system is appropriate in the present day given that “new reality.”

The same criteria underpinning a “good” electoral system were similarly applied to the mixed-member proportional system in the fourth chapter and an assessment was provided as to how well it measures up to those same assumptions. This alternative system, which reflects a considerably different, more modern-day vision of an election, maximizes the most important criteria outlined in the first chapter. In addition, many secondary criteria are successfully achieved by a mixed-member proportional electoral system. These include the way in which the over-rewarding of winning and regional parties is reduced, the under-rewarding of smaller parties is improved, women and minorities have a greater opportunity for election to Parliament, artificial majorities are less common, and voter dissatisfaction can be reduced which can consequently encourage higher voter turnout. As explained, the significance of aggregate election results – embodied in the very foundation of the MMP system (in its reflecting the “new concept”) – is central in enabling it to better meet such criteria.

The analysis has determined that a mixed-member proportional system achieves the key criteria outlined for an electoral system far better than does the current single-

member plurality system. The potential outcomes from changing to an MMP electoral system would in fact prove to be beneficial, primarily because of the significance of such a “wider” concept of an election in modern-day Canada.

The failure of the current SMP system to measure up to the key criteria for a “good” electoral system is implicit in the increasing calls for electoral reform in Canada. The analysis demonstrates how a change to an MMP electoral system will make it possible to eliminate at least some of those problems. However, there is still some need for caution in making a change to such a new electoral system – one which demonstrates a highly different concept of an election – because of the very real possibility for unintended consequences. Such negative potential outcomes include the possibility for instability and reduced efficiency in government, confused accountability, the creation of two “classes” of MPs, the formation of coalition governments not favoured by voters, and a proliferation in the number of parties in Parliament.

Such fears can, however, be largely refuted and evidence has been presented to demonstrate that the anticipated benefits from a change to a mixed-member proportional system do in fact considerably outweigh the feared negative outcomes.

The thesis concludes that a mixed-member proportional system will better achieve the criteria introduced for evaluating a “good” electoral system than does the single-member plurality system. The ideals that underpin an improved electoral system are more attainable under a new MMP system because, unlike the present system with its

more limited concept of an election (which does not recognize the new realities described), MMP (which does reflect the “new concept”) could be designed with these ideas specifically in mind and with the goal of maximizing the criteria – factors which are significant enough that they need to be built in to the foundation of an electoral system. An ideal electoral system is one which meets these goals rather than the outdated primary intentions embodied in the concept of an election of the current SMP electoral system.

The conclusion that MMP better meets the qualities of a “good” electoral system appears to be widely accepted by others, as the mixed-member proportional system has been a commonly mentioned and preferred alternative to the present system amongst many of those informed about and devoted to electoral reform – including academics, politicians, reformers, and ordinary citizens alike. In recent years, several other established democracies such as New Zealand, Japan, Mexico, South Korea, Italy, Wales, and Scotland have adopted variants of MMP in response to the clear failings of their existing electoral systems.¹ Many of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe have also adopted MMP in some form since the early 1990s for their first free elections. In addition, MMP is gaining support in Canada. Three of the five provincial initiatives thus far – the electoral reform commissions in Prince Edward Island, Quebec, and New Brunswick – have recommended variants of MMP. The Law Commission of Canada, an independent federal agency which carried out a two-year study and public consultation on federal voting system reform, also called in its final report in March 2004 for the introduction of

¹ Heather MacIvor. “Proportional and Semi-Proportional Electoral Systems : Their Potential Effects on Canadian Politics.” *Electoral Insight*. Vol. 1. No. 1. (June 1999) : 16.

a mixed-member proportional electoral system. The information provided by such reports and other real world examples reinforce the arguments expressed here.

Lastly, having concluded that the benefits from a change to a mixed-member proportional system outweigh the negatives, an appendix section will follow which analyzes possible barriers to such electoral reform in Canada. The appendix is designed to go beyond the diagnosis of Canada's electoral system to consider why electoral reform has not yet happened, and may not happen, regardless of calls for change to a system like MMP. This discussion illustrates why electoral reform is not as easy to achieve as one might think in spite of the evident problems with the current SMP system and its shortcomings regarding key criteria, both of which are implicit in the calls for change that are now heard across the country.

The appendix will consider why much of the population is resistant to such change. It is important to note that, although the problems inherent in the SMP electoral system have been evident for some time, change has so far been impossible to achieve. However, the appendix also provides insight into possible ways in which the resistance and/or inertia towards electoral reform can nevertheless be overcome in Canada. Questions are thus answered about how the electoral system change evaluated to be beneficial in the thesis body can in fact be introduced in spite of the numerous and substantial obstacles in place in Canada. Instances of limited progress towards electoral reform prove that the barriers to change can in fact be overcome and demonstrate that the problems with the current SMP system are considered valid and taken as reasons to believe that change is

necessary to an electoral system which reflects a different concept of an election and will better achieve such key measures. Learning more about electoral reform may cause people to think more about the idea, and to be more likely to recognize a need for – and therefore be more accepting of – electoral system change. Recognizing the barriers in place to such change also provides an important way of looking towards the future of electoral reform in Canada – much like the rest of the thesis in diagnosing the concepts of an election, the “new concept,” criteria for an improved electoral system, and outcomes from such change to a new system – as such barriers will first need to be understood and then addressed if the electoral system change diagnosed in the thesis as beneficial is to occur.

As an ultimate conclusion, the thesis has introduced the new ways of thinking about an election (a “new concept”) and demonstrated that elections work differently today (a “new reality”) than at the time of SMP’s introduction in Canada. The game has changed. As explained, this “new reality” has major implications for the Canadian electoral system. Such new realities illustrate that there are new needs to be addressed, which accordingly need to be recognized in the concept of an election reflected by the system. These changing ways mean that an electoral system should appropriately follow suit and get with the times. As a result, the “new reality” that is introduced strengthens the argument for change to the electoral system. Introducing this notion of a new way of thinking about an election illustrates how the situation today in Canada has changed to the extent that the current SMP system (with its outdated vision of an election described), since it does not recognize or reflect these changes, is not acceptable anymore – and needs

to be replaced by an electoral system which does properly reflect this “new reality.” Therefore, the thesis concludes that this means change is necessary *today*. It has been shown how one system (MMP) reflects the “new concept” while the other system (SMP) clearly does not.

In closing, the basic insights and original contributions of the thesis have included the way that the concepts of an election are analyzed, a “new reality” is introduced which shows how elections work differently today and how it affects whether an electoral system is still suitable, unique criteria for a “good” electoral system are presented, and insight is even provided into how the substantial barriers to change can in fact be overcome. First of all, the two competing understandings introduced here (those for SMP and MMP respectively) which are held about what an election is to achieve and what a voting system is to provide is an area which tends to be ignored entirely in literature on the topic of electoral reform. Most observers overlook how proponents of an electoral system may have never intended for it to achieve something for which it is being criticized, such as a disproportional translation of vote share into seat share, and how the concept of an election assumed can determine whether the system achieves a particular measure. The thesis has also conducted original research in illustrating the existence of these different concepts held by advocates of the two respective systems from the records of actual arguments given in the Canadian House of Commons. This provides examples of such competing visions. Moreover, little attention is paid by others to recognizing the barriers in place to the electoral reform which is often prescribed to fix the numerous problems identified, and it is even less common for insight to be offered and ideas to be given about how such

barriers to electoral system change may nevertheless be overcome in Canada. Furthermore, criteria for a “good” electoral system are also emphasized in the thesis which diverge considerably from those factors argued by others to be the most important. Not everyone shares the views presented here about what constitutes a “good” electoral system and which criteria are most vital – as can be seen in the notable difference from the prioritizing of criteria by several recent major reports or commissions. Others would, and have done so, make contrasting arguments to those of the thesis. Finally, the notion of a new way of thinking about an election (a “new concept”), as well as how this determines the appropriateness of an electoral system and whether change is immediately necessary as a result of such new realities, is one other original aspect – and insight – introduced here which is not seen elsewhere. This is what the analysis of the thesis has diagnosed, and what its original contribution has been to the electoral reform literature.

APPENDIX

Barriers to Electoral Reform

In spite of the anticipated benefits from electoral reform which have been identified through the examination of the problems with the current single-member plurality system and the extensive positive potential outcomes from such change to MMP, it is undeniable that impediments to change remain. Notable obstacles will need to be overcome if such electoral reform is to take place in Canada to an electoral system which recognizes the new way of thinking about elections. Politicians and the general population both appear to be wary of major change, or of any potential instability which it might cause. It can be extremely difficult to reach a consensus among Canadians that, first of all, electoral reform should occur, and then on what form it should take. Certain revisions may be considered too drastic by many, or be criticized as only cosmetic by addressing symptoms but not causes. Moreover, moving away from a structural tradition which has stood since Confederation to a new system will not be taken lightly or be a quick and easy task. Inertia is an important component to consider in analyzing the barriers to electoral reform. Furthermore, a major barrier to electoral reform is that those in power benefit from the status quo and are therefore unlikely to desire change. Other key barriers to electoral reform in Canada include: substantial caution towards the possibility of change, fear of potential negative side effects and the uncertain results of change, a lack of agreement on what we want from an electoral system, and a desire to maintain certain aspects of the current voting situation. This appendix investigates and explains the considerable barriers to electoral reform which are currently in place in Canada and also highlights possible ways that these obstacles can be overcome.

The role of tradition is extremely important in causing inertia towards electoral reform in Canada. The origins of numerous elements of our single-member plurality electoral system at the federal level date back to Confederation or even earlier. Considering that plurality voting has such deep roots in Canadian history, the idea of sudden change to an electoral system which demonstrates a different concept of an election, in line with the “new reality,” will likely not easily be accepted by much of the general population. Attempts to put recommended electoral system reforms into practice can often end in frustration. SMP tradition is embodied not only in popular feelings but also in the structure of Canadian parliamentary government and constitutional monarchy.¹ The unchanged plurality vote system stands as a notable exception to the general trend of reforming Canada's electoral regime over the course of our history since Confederation.²

It can be seen as entirely natural to continue with the electoral system which is familiar. A resulting contributing factor to Canadians' resistance to change may be a conventional belief that electoral systems reflect deep-rooted aspects of national character and political life.³ A general picture is said to exist of countries as wedded to a single system adjusted to their national circumstances.⁴ A “system-biased” view may exist among some Canadians that whatever electoral system is in place is “natural” and thus preferred. Opponents of change will not want this inherited pillar of Canada's political system to be fundamentally altered or even discarded in favour of some electoral system that is as yet

¹ Irvine, *Does Canada Need a New Electoral System?*, 74.

² Courtney, *Elections*, 4.

³ Patrick Dunleavy and Helen Margetts. “Understanding the Dynamics of Electoral Reform.” *International Political Science Review*. Vol. 16. No. 1. (January 1995) : 10.

⁴ *Ibid.* 10.

untried in Canada and unfamiliar.⁵ Many may be wary about, and consequently oppose, entering uncharted waters without a historical map to draw upon.

There exist reasons for caution towards a change from the current SMP electoral system. In spite of its meeting more of the criteria for a “good” electoral system introduced in this thesis, the results from a change to a mixed-member proportional system are uncertain. As a result, many may be hesitant or unwilling to accept the implementation of such electoral reform. The danger of unintended consequences from electoral reform, despite what may be good intentions, cannot be overlooked and makes the need for caution unmistakable. Recognition of this reality, and a desire to be cautious, leads much of the population to be resistant to such change in electoral systems. Some resistance may also be created due to the possible scope of system change which may be necessary for electoral reform, and consequent unease about potential implications.

A prevailing attitude exists in Canada which suggests caution and discourages incremental tinkering: the longstanding electoral system at least does the job, and keeping the ills we know of may be better than leaping into the unknown.⁶ Few – political elites and ordinary citizens alike – seem willing to take the “leap of faith” that electoral reform might require. Many fear that the law of unintended consequences is substantial in its potential scope.⁷ Consequently, this argues for advancing in small steps, and accords well

⁵ Courtney, *Elections*, 175.

⁶ Pippa Norris. “Introduction : The Politics of Electoral Reform.” *International Political Science Review*. Vol. 16. No. 1. (January 1995) : 3.

⁷ Gibson et al., “A Report on the Need For Certain Constitutional Change in British Columbia, and a Mechanism for Developing Specific Proposals,” in Gibson, ed., *Fixing Canadian Democracy*, 263.

with the innate caution of Canadians.⁸ Moreover, the recognized positive aspects of the current single-member plurality electoral system, explained in the second chapter, may also lead many to believe that it is preferable to maintain the present system which, at least, Canadians know and understand what its effects are. This historical inertia and resistance to change have clearly not been unique to Canada, as the basic electoral rules by which votes are translated into seats has persisted in a great number of countries without fundamental change ever since their emergence as liberal democracies.⁹

Inertia also results from a low general awareness or understanding about the topic. Such a lack of public understanding about the electoral system clearly creates a hurdle for any changes which might be proposed. This makes it difficult even to frame an electoral reform debate. Lack of public knowledge or interest is an important obstacle to change which will have to first be addressed. Without sufficient public education, risk-averse voters are far more likely to reject change simply for want of information.¹⁰

Electoral system change is not something which is taken lightly. It is realized that change for its own sake may be dangerous, as changes made may work through the electoral system to create other changes and have other side effects, therefore causing many to believe that it should be avoided. Defenders of the current electoral system have continued to question whether the benefits of any suggested electoral reform would

⁸ Gibson et al., "A Report on the Need For Certain Constitutional Change in British Columbia, and a Mechanism for Developing Specific Proposals," in Gibson, ed., *Fixing Canadian Democracy*, 263.

⁹ Pippa Norris. "Introduction : The Politics of Electoral Reform." *International Political Science Review*. Vol. 16. No. 1. (January 1995) : 3.

¹⁰ Mendelsohn et al. "Getting From Here to There : A Process For Electoral Reform in Canada." *Policy Options*. Vol. 22. No. 6. (July-August 2001) : 59.

justify the potential risks to the larger Canadian political system.¹¹ Objections to electoral reform in Canada often hinge on fear of the consequences of change as well as a hope that something will turn up to resolve present difficulties.¹²

Some may also be scared away from electoral reform due to horror stories heard about some of the absolute worst case examples found elsewhere. For example, citizens may be fearful that change may potentially lead to increased instability in government. Many may also be hesitant towards change due to worries about a possible significant proliferation in the number of parties created under a more proportional electoral system like MMP. The reality that the impact and results in practice of electoral reform cannot be predicted with exact certainty leads to resistance among many to the idea of tinkering with electoral institutions.

Even if Canadians knew for certain what we would get in terms of results from electoral reform, we do not agree about what it is that we want.¹³ Although MMP has been shown here to achieve more of the criteria introduced for a “good” electoral system, the population recognizes that the vast expenditure of intellectual energy and ability has not yet devised an electoral system that is optimal from all points of view.¹⁴ Consequently, resistance to change – as well as its uncertainty – remains. It is extremely difficult to make everyone happy, and to satisfy every different interest, with a single proposed

¹¹ Courtney, *Elections*, 15.

¹² Donley Studlar, “Will Canada Seriously Consider Electoral System Reform? Women and Aboriginals Should,” in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 131.

¹³ Richard Katz, “Electoral Reform is Not as Simple as it Looks,” in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 102.

¹⁴ Irvine, *Does Canada Need a New Electoral System?*, 4.

electoral system. In addition, vagueness about what the population would prefer from a changed electoral system can contribute to inertia, and then to resistance to change once a proposal is made which does not fully reflect what some people vaguely hold as their ideal vision. Precise criteria are rarely specified, despite being highly possible – as they have been here throughout and may have always been implicit.¹⁵

It is not difficult to find fault with the current single-member plurality electoral system; rather, the more difficult obstacle is to sufficiently address – and be convincing enough to cause some of the inertia and resistance to be overcome in doing so – why reform should be implemented, what kinds of reform should be introduced, and what are the probable consequences, especially the expected benefits, of such change. Agreement has not, and will not, easily be reached on these topics. Those who favour electoral reform in Canada can agree neither on a preferred alternative to first-past-the-post nor on the benefits expected to result from change.¹⁶ Given the abundance of different proposals being thrown around recently in Canada, widespread agreement at the federal level on a single preferred option does not appear to be on the horizon any time soon.¹⁷ Without an agreed-upon alternative to plurality voting, much of the debate over electoral reform in Canada is played out in a political and constitutional limbo.¹⁸ Divided opinions about what form of change to pursue provide a barrier. Change will not occur until there is a large majority in favour of electoral reform, and then in favour of a single potential alternative, such as MMP, which has been shown here to maximize the most important

¹⁵ Jonathan W. Still. “Political Equality and Election Systems.” *Ethics* (April 1981) : 390.

¹⁶ Courtney, *Elections*, 146.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 169.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 146.

criteria for a “good” electoral system. Similarly, until the electorate can reach a widely-held consensus on which single alternative electoral system is the most preferred, after first of all overcoming the substantial inertia towards even learning about the voting system and then accepting such change in the first place, any persuasion of the government through such arguments which might eventually lead to change is unlikely. Without extensive and sustained disapproval of the current system by the electorate, coupled with general agreement on an acceptable alternative to plurality voting, any push for electoral reform in Canada is likely to continue to fall on deaf government ears.¹⁹ The case for electoral reform will appear less compelling to those in a position to introduce a process towards such change when the arguments for reform derive principally from periodic dissatisfaction with results of particular elections and when it is expressed only by a limited number of individuals.²⁰

Important factors besides the electoral system itself, such as possible side effects, must also be taken into consideration, and such fears must be soothed and laid to rest, before electoral reform will be widely embraced and progress can be made. Some will also likely oppose the idea of a national referendum being held on electoral reform, as well as public educational campaigns about the issues and implications involved in the choice, largely due to concern about potential financial costs. Concern may also exist about such a referendum being manipulated by the government, for example, through biased wording of the referendum question.

¹⁹ Courtney, *Elections*, 169.

²⁰ John C. Courtney. “Is Talk of Electoral Reform Just Whistling in the Wind?” *Policy Options*. Vol. 22. No. 6. (July-August 2001) : 20.

A major barrier to electoral reform is that those in power benefit from the status quo and are, therefore, understandably unlikely to desire change. While others may see great virtue in electoral reform, those in power are likely to resist changing the current situation which has been to their advantage and brought them to power. It is never easy to change an electoral system, since the governing politicians – and thus those with the power to implement changes – tend to have a vested interest in maintaining the present system that elected them.²¹ Electoral reform needs to wait until some governing party is willing to change the electoral system which gave it the advantage in the preceding election.²² Once they attain power under the single-member plurality system, leaders may become less supportive of an electoral system that would require their sharing power. This is often the case even for parties which had advocated electoral reform when previously not in power. Anyone who owes their position and influence to the existing system will normally support it for fear of change possibly leading to their replacement. Electoral reform is unlikely unless it can be shown to be in the interests, whether immediate or as they might evolve in the short term, of current political actors.²³ Given the way that parties define their interests, only a clear threat to their electoral support is likely to induce them to venture on this kind of reform.²⁴ Those benefiting from the current system usually find it difficult to accept that it could turn against them until after it has happened.²⁵

²¹ Henry Milner, "The Case For Proportional Representation in Canada," in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 47.

²² Jean-Francois Caron. "The End of the First-Past-the-Post System?" *Canadian Parliamentary Review*. 23.

²³ Irvine, *Does Canada Need a New Electoral System?*, 68.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 71.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 71.

A number of important conditions, which appear difficult to reach, would have to first be in place before a different method of election will be able to replace the current single-member plurality electoral system in Canada. One such central condition for electoral reform is that governing elites would have to accept the case for modifying the current system.²⁶ Such support will not be easily attained, especially when one considers that winning parties tend to be over-rewarded in terms of seats by the current SMP system. Many of the government leaders will want to continue to have distorted election results that work to their own advantage, and thus will be less willing to get the ball rolling towards electoral system change. The way in which a mixed-member proportional electoral system would not work to the same over-rewarding advantage – even of a party poised to win election – is likely to reduce their support for such change as well. A government's self-interest will be a leading factor in any reform of electoral institutions, and provides an important obstacle to overcome if change is to be introduced. Parties may evaluate and derive preferences for alternative electoral institutions based on their expectations about the payoffs, particularly in terms of distributive share of legislative seats and power that these alternatives will have for them in the future. Changed electoral systems can be viewed as resulting almost solely from the collective choice of political parties linking institutional alternatives to their own electoral self-interest in the form of maximizing seat shares.²⁷ The probability of a change in electoral institutions is higher only when a political party or coalition of parties supports an alternative system which will potentially bring it more seats and/or more power in government than the status quo

²⁶ Courtney, *Elections*, 168.

²⁷ Kenneth Benoit. "Models of Electoral System Change." *Electoral Studies*. Vol. 23. Issue 3. (September 2004) : 373.

electoral system.²⁸ Electoral systems will not likely change when no party or coalition of parties with the power to adopt an alternative electoral system believes that it can gain more seats by doing so.²⁹

During the process towards electoral system change, such as from the initial time of the formation of a study group or a commission until legislation is to be implemented, any one of many possible things can go amiss to derail progress. Both the public and politicians will likely only become even more discouraged towards the idea of electoral reform if no changes are made as a result of the present plethora of action across the country towards the subject. Frustration will only grow if, even after all of the respective commissions have argued against the current system – which does not reflect the “new reality” in its concept of an election – and recommended change to one that does, we do not capitalize on this recent surge of momentum and let this opportunity for electoral reform pass by. It may be a long time until such a flurry of activity again surrounds the topic of electoral reform in Canada.

The Possibility of Overcoming Barriers Towards Electoral Reform

In spite of the numerous barriers to change in Canada which have been highlighted, the inertia and resistance towards electoral reform can nevertheless be overcome. A number of key factors can create a greater willingness to consider, and possibly even embrace, electoral system change in Canada. Shocks to the system provide one such

²⁸ Kenneth Benoit. “Models of Electoral System Change.” *Electoral Studies*. Vol. 23. Issue 3. (September 2004) : 374.

²⁹ Ibid. 374.

situation. Other leading conditions or situations which may contribute to overcoming inertia and embracing electoral reform in Canada include: an escalation in public dissatisfaction with the current electoral system, increased public knowledge about the potential benefits of change, support for change from the Canadian political elite and from some of the political parties, political leaders feeling obligated to follow through with past commitments made to look at possible changes, and encouraging examples of successful electoral system change being observed elsewhere. These possible ways in which inertia, resistance, and other barriers to electoral reform in Canada can be overcome will now in turn be illustrated and explained.

Certain critical variables must first be in place if an electoral system is to be reformed, for change rests upon a number of fundamental pre-conditions collectively being met – some of which may currently be absent in Canada.³⁰ To overcome inertia and other barriers in trying to achieve actual electoral reform, helpful conditions include having a party in power that has been victimized by the status quo in the past, a wider package of democratic reforms of which electoral reform is only a part, and a genuine public interest in reform.³¹ However, such factors which may persuade politicians to accept change are difficult to produce on demand, particularly in the absence of a major crisis.³² In pursuing electoral reform, a checklist for overcoming the notable barriers to change includes: making electoral reform appear relevant; providing the public with as

³⁰ John C. Courtney. "Is Talk of Electoral Reform Just Whistling in the Wind?" *Policy Options*. Vol. 22. No. 6. (July-August 2001) : 17.

³¹ Mendelsohn et al. "Getting From Here to There : A Process For Electoral Reform in Canada." *Policy Options*. Vol. 22. No. 6. (July-August 2001) : 55.

³² *Ibid.* 57.

much information as possible about the proposed change; seeking public input; trying to implicate and involve politicians as well as political parties; and emphasizing and building on key values that many hold.

Increasing public awareness and knowledge, possibly through information campaigns, is one notable means of improving the prospects for electoral reform in Canada. Much of the inertia towards electoral reform is likely due to many people being essentially uninformed about it. A sufficiently wide public understanding is lacking in Canada of what the current electoral system is and the effect that it has. Learning and knowing more about electoral reform, and its potential benefits, appears to cause people to become more receptive to and supportive of the idea.

Electoral reform needs a concerted push from a significant segment of the Canadian political elite as well as substantial public support in order to overcome the barriers to change.³³ If reform is to stand a greater chance of adoption, it will likely need to be recommended and spurred on by influential political leaders and/or a high-profile commission. Debate or even proposals among political elites or through a commission will give the issue a higher profile than it might otherwise have. This preaching of electoral reform ideas by political parties or even by the government would be one way to increase interest in the topic and cause the general public to be more receptive to, and possibly even mobilize for, these recommended changes. Such increased receptivity

³³ Donley Studlar, "Will Canada Seriously Consider Electoral System Reform? Women and Aboriginals Should," in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 130.

would also likely increase public awareness about the problems with the current electoral system.³⁴ More opposition to the current electoral system, which is crucial if resistance or other barriers to change are to eventually be overcome, would likely be generated if the public were made more aware of the faults of first-past-the-post voting. Popular public demand is an important way to potentially bring about change. Otherwise, widespread discussions about – and, possibly, prospects for – electoral reform may subside quickly. Public interest in the topic is important for overcoming the barriers in that it may also inspire self-interested political parties to include electoral reform in its platform or even take action, particularly as a way to try to latch on and gain popularity. Electoral reform could use a leading champion, most likely in the form of an influential and preferably high profile political leader or spokesperson. Popular opinion might be willing to follow a strong lead for change.³⁵ However, if electoral reform loses its champion – its leading voice – any momentum towards change may be lost and any window of opportunity which had been created may be missed.

Progress towards electoral system change can be facilitated by the informed field of academics, think-tanks, politicians, media, and public service which is already in place, and has only grown in size with the recent surge in interest and even initiatives towards electoral reform in Canada. This base, which is already in place, can help to end the lack of widespread public interest in and knowledge about the topic and assist in it and other

³⁴ Kornberg et al., “Representative Democracy Reconsidered,” in J. Paul Johnston and Harvey E. Pasis, eds., *Representation and Electoral Systems : Canadian Perspectives*. (Scarborough, Ontario : Prentice Hall Canada Inc., 1990), 170.

³⁵ Donley Studlar, “Will Canada Seriously Consider Electoral System Reform? Women and Aboriginals Should,” in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 130.

barriers, particularly inertia, being overcome. A substantial reservoir of expertise exists on the topic of electoral reform, and ensures that the issue will not go away instantly. Such pressure will remain, especially if some of the different initiatives underway do succeed at the provincial level. The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, much like other similar initiatives in New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Ontario, and Quebec, provides an encouraging example that the public can be interested in and even want to be involved in a process towards electoral reform. The 160 Citizens' Assembly members willingly chose to be involved, were receptive to and supportive of the idea of electoral reform, and put in a lot of hard work throughout the slightly more than year-long process. Uninformed, randomly-selected public citizens first learned information about electoral systems and then considered what changes, if any, could and should be made. Obstacles might also more likely be overcome if electoral reform is linked with other issues of democratic reform. By itself, electoral reform may appear to many to be a technical and arcane issue, but it is more likely to capture the public's interest and support when presented as part of a broader package of democratic reforms.³⁶

Five current provincial leaders in Canada, Gordon Campbell in British Columbia – who was denied victory in the 1996 provincial election despite winning the popular vote due to the workings of the single-member plurality system – Pat Binns in Prince Edward Island, Dalton McGuinty in Ontario, Jean Charest in Quebec, and Bernard Lord in New Brunswick, made public commitments to look at electoral reform when formerly in Opposition and have subsequently introduced processes to examine possible change.

³⁶ Mendelsohn et al. "Getting From Here to There : A Process For Electoral Reform in Canada." *Policy Options*. Vol. 22. No. 6. (July-August 2001) : 58.

Now that they have risen to power, their initiatives may force subsequent leaders to similarly feel obligated to fulfill platform promises regarding electoral reform made either while in opposition and/or while competing in an election. A similar noteworthy example can be seen in New Zealand, where the Labor Party was denied victory in both the 1978 and 1981 elections despite winning the popular vote both times. The party was consequently spurred by these losses to include a promise for a commission looking at electoral reform in its next election platform – a promise which they made good on when they came to power in 1984. However, many such leaders who have taken or will take action towards change as a result of having made past promises may face objections even from within their own government party by doing so.

Additionally, a party forming a minority government or within a coalition may be forced to rely on the support in Parliament of another party which might make that support conditional upon the government's willingness to move along the process towards electoral reform. Such a situation might produce an agreement to initiate a referendum on electoral reform. This is one of the only situations under which governing elites might agree to a referendum on electoral reform: if it were demanded by a smaller party as a condition of propping up a minority government.³⁷ Moreover, if a smaller party, which has likely been repeatedly penalized by SMP's tendency to under-reward such parties in terms of seats, makes a referendum on electoral reform the requisite of their participation in a minority or coalition government, a close campaign which makes a hung parliament a possibility may also cause the media to pay far more attention to the issue of electoral

³⁷ Kent Weaver, "MMP is Too Much of Some Good Things," in Milner, *Making Every Vote Count*, 80.

reform.³⁸ Reformers can be active in insisting that such promises are highlighted rather than buried in election campaign platforms, and try to encourage other parties to respond to desires for change. In looking at recent examples of the introduction of electoral reform in other countries, such as in the Japanese case, it is only when a large coalition of parties get together, all with ironclad commitments to reform and a shared belief that the public is interested and expects these commitments to be honoured, that the systematic inertia against change can be overcome.³⁹

Canada is not entering entirely uncharted waters in this area of electoral reform. Other countries which have recently introduced electoral system changes can provide case studies and lessons for us to analyze. If one or more of these other countries, or even one or more of the Canadian provinces, can successfully make electoral system change work – and be clearly seen to do so – this can be an encouraging inspiration for change here in Canada. Momentum can snowball from seeing such changes elsewhere. Observing these changes can also increase interest in the topic. Moreover, the initiatives towards electoral reform in five different provinces, especially if some of them do in fact go forward in their different variants of change, can provide an informative laboratory experiment for possible future electoral system change at the federal level. Electoral reform at the federal level is less likely without successful change first being seen at the provincial level.

Finally, one other way in which some of the resistance and/or inertia may be overcome is due to high dissatisfaction with the current single-member plurality electoral

³⁸ Mendelsohn et al. “Getting From Here to There : A Process For Electoral Reform in Canada.” *Policy Options*. Vol. 22. No. 6. (July-August 2001) : 57.

³⁹ Ibid. 58.

system. Dialogue about possible electoral reform can be one of the results. It is clear that the seeds of public discontent exist and that many Canadians appear supportive of the concept of improved proportionality.⁴⁰ Continued frustration with the problems of the current electoral system will only increase the numbers and the determination of those seeking change. Instances of recent progress towards electoral reform in several Canadian provinces demonstrate that the problems with the current system are considered valid and taken as reasons to believe that change is necessary. A current push to replace SMP with a system which will improve proportionality, like MMP does, has largely been a product of discontent over election results like the three between 1993 and 2000 – which clearly illustrated the perversities of the current system – as well as several recent lopsided provincial elections.⁴¹ Public opinion and elite debates are turning to questions about designing electoral systems.⁴² Increased dissatisfaction with the current system, when combined with increased discussion, makes it more possible that the barriers to change introduced may be overcome in Canada.

⁴⁰ Darrell Bricker and Martin Redfern. "Canadian Perspectives on the Voting System." *Policy Options*. Vol. 22. No. 6. (July-August 2001) : 22.

⁴¹ Courtney, *Elections*, 155.

⁴² Patrick Dunleavy and Helen Margetts. "Understanding the Dynamics of Electoral Reform." *International Political Science Review*. Vol. 16. No. 1. (January 1995) : 9.

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