

CRYING FOR ELECTION REFORM: A THEME OF POLITICAL
DISCOURSE IN CANADA AND INDIA

Draft paper for presentation at the Annual General Conference of the
Canadian Political Science Association at Carleton University, Ottawa,
May 29, 2009

By

BINOY SHANKER PRASAD, PhD

Department of Politics and Public Administration

Ryerson University

350 Victoria Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5B 2K3

bprasad@politics.ryerson.ca

CRYING FOR ELECTION REFORM: A THEME OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN CANADA AND INDIA

BINOY SHANKER PRASAD

Canada and India have a serious electoral problem of the First Past the Post (FPP) system. In a parliamentary riding (called constituency in India), the winner A has less than 50% of the votes polled. Or, many a time, the runners up B and C had more votes combined than the winner A. The phenomenon – “ $B + C > A$ ” -- is formidable. The flaw in the electoral system transforms the elected body into an unrepresentative assembly. A large number of voters feel disenfranchised and they tend to feel their votes did not count. The voters’ apathy leads to further diminished participation in elections. In 2008, only 58.9% voters exercised their franchise in Canada (“Voter turnout drops to record low.” www.cbc.ca/ October 15, 2008). The highest voter turnout was in P.E.I., where 69.5 per cent of registered voters took part in the election. The lowest turnout was recorded in Newfoundland and Labrador, where just 48.1% of registered voters cast their ballots. In India, the voters’ participation ranges from 40-60%.

THE MALADY

In 1983 parliamentary election, the conservatives in Canada received the highest percentage of votes, 42% and picked up 397 seats. The liberals got 28% of the vote and 209 seats. The SDP/Lib Alliance were a little behind with 26% of the vote, but they could get only 23 seats in all. By and large, this kind of a trend was repeated in every election which had led a section of the Canadians to believe that the FPP was not a fair system of representation.

Under the current system, a large portion of voters felt they had to give support to a party candidate, not because they necessarily believed they would represent them best, but because they were the best (available) strategic choice against a candidate or party they disliked most. Some Canadians call it ‘strategic voting’ and ‘vote

swapping.’ (5 Reasons to Reject FPTP.” www.electoralreformcanada.ca/ Retrieved May 15, 2009) This, according to them, was a wasted vote because strategic voting didn’t allow one to vote for what one really wanted. In this context, it is argued that over 7 million votes went in vain in the 2008 Canadian federal election. That is about 50% of all voters. Such ‘orphan votes’ skewed the election results. In 2008, again, 25% of the Conservative party supporters wasted their votes that were almost equivalent to the votes of both the Liberal Party and the NDP. The “throng of orphans” were spread all over Canada and included “Liberals in the West, Conservatives in urban centres, and New Democrats and Greens everywhere.” (“Are you an Orphan Voter?” www.orphanvoters.ca/ Retrieved May 16, 2009). It is estimated that almost 7,584,409 ballots, i.e., the votes of the majority of Canadians, didn’t elect any one. They were not taken into account by the political system. A ‘neglected and abused citizen’ who wanted to be represented in Parliament was ‘turned away’ because the vote didn’t count toward electing any one? Fair Vote Canada, a multi-partisan citizens group formed in 2000 to promote electoral reform estimated that the number of “orphan voters” – votes which received no representation in Parliament – was at an astonishing seven million (i.e., the majority of voters).

The ‘bloated presence’ of the Bloc Québécois in the House of Commons was also pointed out as a consequence of the FPP system. The majority of Quebecers have consistently supported federalist parties (i.e. the Liberals or the Conservatives). The province has, however, repeatedly sent large majorities of Bloc MPs to Ottawa. In 2008, the Bloc Quebecois captured two thirds of the province’s seat share despite scoring under 40 per cent of the popular vote. (“Canadians must demand electoral reform.” www.intercamp.ca/ Retrieved May 23, 2009).

Low voters’ turnouts, it is said, were the direct symptoms of the FPP system. Voters didn’t want to go to the polls to mark a piece of paper when they perfectly knew their votes had high chances of being wasted? The more this kind of a frustration set in, turnouts got lower and lower. Many Canadians believed they went to the polls to make their voice heard and to participate in their democracy, not to see their votes wasted. (Blair Redlin, “Learning from the lowest turnout ever.” www.election.rabble.ca/ October 15, 2008)

Another unintended consequence of this kind of an election result is that it impacts on coalition making exercise. As the Israeli elections showed recently, the parties with least representation called the shots or sometimes blackmailed the parties leading the coalition. It was in evidence in India and Pakistan also.

In Canada, there have been many efforts to correct the system. In the recent past, provinces like Ontario, Prince Edward Island (PEI) and British Columbia (BC) have put to referendum a voting method that could replace the FPP system, but with little success. In India, where the parliamentary (Lok Sabha) election is afflicted with similar problems, there have been little or no electoral reforms. In early 70's, there were some voices of concern and a few times election reform did find mention in the manifestoes of a few political parties. But, later the demand seemed to have died. Most political parties benefit or hope to benefit from the division of votes against them.

BC-STV REFERENDUM

On May 12, 2009, the voters of British Columbia went to the polls to elect a premier (equivalent to the Chief Minister in provinces of India) and also to register their opinion on a proposed election reform. The election reform proposal on the ballot was to replace the First Past the Post (FPP) system with the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system. The voters, however, did not show overwhelming enthusiasm. Among the eligible voters, a little more than 52 per cent participated in the voting.

Since 2001, the provincial voter turnout fell more than 18 points. The voters' turnout among eligible voters, in 2009, dropped 10 percentage points from the 2005 election. This was the lowest balloting response to a B.C. election since records were maintained in 1928. Referendum on the electoral reform, therefore, didn't motivate people to get out and vote. British Columbia used to be politically vibrant in the 1980's and its voter turnout usually exceeded 75 per cent. With this low participation, B.C. came next to Alberta in being the 'most apathetic electorate in Canada.'¹

The decline in the voters' turn out was attributed to the failure to fire voters' interest, negative campaigning and lack of media coverage. There was also a growing perception that individual votes didn't matter in ridings where the result was almost pre-determined. Some believed in the past voters needed a form of proportional representation, which counted votes for parties as well as individual candidates. The voters needed to be motivated to the ballot box.

The electoral reform suggested and eventually put on the ballot was precisely to mitigate that challenge. After a long deliberation in 2004 the Citizen Assembly on electoral reforms, composed of 160 citizens of British Columbia recommended the Single Transferable Vote, popularly known as BC-STV as an alternative to the FPP system. In 2005 election in British Columbia, this proposal was put to vote. With nearly 57% of the province-wide vote in its favour, the proposal came very close to winning. The proposal was put to referendum again in May, 2009 because of its popularity in 2005. The government was persuaded by the demand of many citizen-voters that they should have a second look at the proposal. Many said they didn't understand the issue in 2005. This time around, however, the electorate defeated BC-STV by a wide margin of 60%. In order to win, the ballot-proposal BC-STV had to secure 60% of the province-wide vote, it got only 39%. The referendum also needed to pass in 51 ridings out of 85 ("2009 British Columbia General Election." www.mapleleafweb.com/ April 21, 2009). In any case, the proposal succeeded in only a few².

The BC-STV was a system of preferential voting designed to improve upon proportional system of representation. Under this system, voters were asked to put in the background party affiliation of candidates and rank them in order of preference by assigning a number on the ballot. The ballots were then to be counted in a manner that was considered to be 'a little complicated.' A definite number of positions were to be decided by merging a few ridings. Then, the winning (target) number of votes was to be determined for every candidate in the riding based on the number of voters and candidates. First, the candidate with the most 'first preference votes' fulfilling the target would be elected. Then, the 'second preference votes' received by that candidate would be distributed among candidates, and the next winner would be decided.

The process would be followed until all seats in the riding were filled and all votes had been counted. So much so that the second preference votes of candidates who had been eliminated at the end would also be accounted for. The system was fair in the sense that the ballots were counted in a manner that “allowed the candidates with the highest response to be elected.”³ The critics of the proposal, however, argued that it was too complicated for the people to understand the method of counting and, therefore, the entire voting process was confusing. In Ireland, this system was said to be working fine. There, the politicians wanted to get rid of this system, but the voters would not let them do that. In Canada, however, the BC-STV system was not time-tested in real-life situations and according to the opponents, countries with similar systems experienced difficulty following the results with clarity.

PROPOSED MMP SYSTEM IN ONTARIO

Other provinces in Canada have also attempted at electoral reforms in the past with little or no success. The province of Ontario, for example, had a vote on MMP (Mixed Member Proportional) system in October of 2007. Under the proposed system, Ontario was to be compressed into only 90 electoral districts instead of 107. In addition to an MPP (Member Provincial Parliament) for every district, there was to be another set of 39 MPPs elected at large, based on the share of the popular vote secured and lists submitted by the political parties.

According to the referendum supporters like ‘Vote for MMP campaign,’ the change would have made the government more approachable, accountable and efficient. The opponents like “No MMP” argued that the people would have “politicians being chosen by other politicians.” Both sides, however, agreed that allocating seats to parties based on their share of the popular vote would produce more minority governments but smaller parties would enjoy more powers. The supporters advanced the case that there would be more consensus building and more consultations rather than “ramming things through the house like a rubber stamp.” The opponents said the proposed system would produce a provincial government that would be weak and less democratic because one-third of the legislature would not be chosen by the voter.

Said to be patterned after a system that has worked in Germany and New Zealand for many years, the MMP system advocated to have 39 extra representatives chosen by local party members, who might or might not be politicians. Similar to the 'List System,' where a political party presented a list of candidates to the voters and the voters voted for the party and not necessarily for the candidates. The political parties would, then, have their candidates in based on their share in the popular vote. A voter would, thus, be represented by his or her local MPP as well as other MPPs in the party he or she might have voted for. The voter would have representation by a person of his/her choosing irrespective of whether the political party had won in the voter's electoral district. That way, the supporters argued, every vote from all four corners of the province would count no matter whoever won the local seat. Again, this proposal could not carry the day.

In Indian context, any proportional representation would be confusing because of the cultural and demographic diversity.

FOR AND AGAINST THE PROPORTIONAL VOTING SYSTEM

Experts say Canada had to design a voting system where all the ballots in the box "mattered." (Randy Simms, "Surely we can do better" *The Telegram*, St. John's, NL, October 18, 2008 quoted in "What they're saying about Election 2008." www.fairvote.ca. /Retrieved May 18, 2009). They pointed out that more and more money spent on elections (The 40th general election in Canada cost almost \$300 million) attracted fewer and fewer voters.

Again, the remedy, the proportional system of representation, they argued gave enormous powers to the parties. But in countries with proportional representation, there is also the problem of low voter turn-out.

As mentioned earlier, in 2008 election, only 58.9 percent - or 13.8 million out of 23.4 million - of eligible voters actually voted which is a historic low in Canada.

The NDP received 1.1 million more votes than the Bloc Quebecois and got 37 seats only, whereas the Bloc secured 50 seats (<http://www.fairvote.ca/>). It's also correct that 940,000 voters supporting the Green Party couldn't send a single member to

Parliament. By comparison, 813,000 Conservative voters in Alberta were able to elect 27 MPs.

The votes on October 14, 2008 had given a different kind of result under a fair and proportional system. The seat allocation would have been roughly as follows:

Conservatives: 117 seats instead of 143

Liberals - 81 seats instead of 76

NDP: 57 seats instead of 37

Bloc: 28 seats and not 50

The Greens had been the hardest hit: Instead of securing 23 seats, they got nil.

COUNTER ARGUMENT

The explanation for the above finding is not very complicated. The NDP and the Greens contested nationally and therefore their number is dispersed whereas the Bloc concentrated its effort in one province only.

In a similar way, the regional parties in India do very well, harness more parliamentary seats in their region of influence and become coalition partners at the federal level. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) is a national party but regionally it performs very well such as in provinces like West Bengal, Tripura, and Kerala. There are other regional parties like Telugu Desam in Andhra Pradesh, or DMK in Tamil Nadu. There are parties who project themselves as national parties but they are essentially regional parties such as RJD in Bihar, BSP in Uttar Pradesh, Trinamul Congress in West Bengal etc.

In Canada, yes, the Greens would have gotten 23 seats. But who would have selected those 23 candidates if they were not a clear winner from their ridings. There were 308 Green candidates who ran. On what criteria those 23 be selected? They may not be the best of the Green party. This may turn out to be a recipe for the supremacy of political parties and their bosses who might override the will of the people. That will be even more undemocratic. India may have even a graver risk. With proportional representation-- unelected members who owe their jobs to the whips and Party leaders and not to the voters would inflate party bureaucracy.

An MP has to be the MP of the people. The winner must also enjoy confidence of the majority.

ELECTORAL REFORM: AN ECLECTIC PROPOSAL

In order to cleanse the political system and restore electoral fairness in both Canada and India, a few reforms are called for. They should not be radical as to create suspicion and turn people off. But, at the same time, the reforms must be transparent and easy to understand. The following suggestions may be the basis of a discussion:

There must be a central authority to oversee and conduct elections. The elections must be uniform in procedure and codes. That would mean having an electronic voting system backed up by paper records.

The voting should stay open for four days including a week-end.

Voting must be made mandatory. It has to become a part of the civic habit just as filing tax on time or keeping garbage on the curb on the pick up day. In Australia, it is legally required of every eligible voter to vote.

Any voter carrying two IDs, one of them being a picture one with his/her Social Insurance Number could vote from anywhere. Just as people do web-banking, voters can vote by going to an appropriate website by entering their SIN or a password. Voters could vote electronically: from overseas or anywhere else. This will preclude any chance of duplication or voter fraud. No waiting in the line or 'voter-caging.' Local libraries or banks could facilitate this kind of a voting.

Besides, these technical efficiency-issues, Canada and India have to deal with more serious systemic and procedural problems that have developed over a period of time. The remedy is to have a winner in a constituency secure 50% + of the votes polled. Failing which there must be a state-funded run off between the first two leading candidates. France has a run off system. For a senate seat in the state of Georgia, USA, the winner has to secure more than 50% of the vote otherwise there will be a run off. The prospects are that whenever the election was likely to go into the run off stage, the eliminated candidates or parties would ally themselves

with the platform of either of the two parties or candidates. Or, conversely, the two front-runners will seek the support of other political factions in the riding. In this way, “interest aggregation and articulation” will pave the way for realignment of political forces in the riding and they will manifest in voting in the final round. Every one will have a say in the selection of candidates because every one’s vote would count. The winners will also be accountable to their voters in their constituencies and not to the party bosses in Queens Park, Ottawa or New Delhi.

Until a new system has been found, as Churchill said, democracy is the best system. In order to breathe life into democracy, the electoral system has to be reformed.

NOTES

1. Rod Mickleburgh, “Apathy hits new high, turnout hits record low.” May 14, 2009. www.globeandmail.com. But that’s not the whole story: Where the voters felt they had a stake, they did show their enthusiasm. The turn out, for example, was an impressive 70% for the election between Attorney-General Wally Oppal and the Independent challenger Vicki Huntington.
2. “B.C. voters turn thumbs down on STV.” May 12, 2009. www.cbc.ca, Neal Hall, “BC-STV rejected by a wide margin.” May 13, 2009. www.theprovince.com,
3. The arguments for and against the proposal could be found on the website of the two sides: stv.ca, and nostv.ca. In 2009, the government of B.C. allocated half-a- million dollars to the two sides to engage in voters’ education campaign (A lesson for the Indian political system). The illustrations are given on the modern media like YouTube also: “BC-STV Animation.” www.YouTube.com, “Gummy Bears for BC-STV.” www.YouTube.com/
4. “Debate heats up before Ont. referendum on electoral changes.” August 7, 2007. www.cbc.ca/

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

“The Case for PR (2): BC’s Lasting Choice.” *Globe and Mail*, May 3, 2005.

“The Case for PR (3): Why Mixed is Best,” *Globe and Mail*, May 4, 2005.

“The Case for PR (4): What Might Have Been,” *Globe and Mail*, May 5, 2005.

“Life after STV.” *Globe and Mail*, May 20, 2005.

“McGuinty’s Risky Electoral Rethink.” *Toronto Star*, March 28, 2006.

“No Electoral Panacea to Low Voter Turnout.” *Toronto Star*, September 2005.

“Women in the House.” *Ottawa Citizen*, January 30, 2006.

Andrew, Blake, Antonia Maoini, and Stuart Soroka. “Just When You Thought It Was Out, Policy is Pulled Back In.” *Policy Options*, March 2006.

Blais, Andre, Patrick Fournier, Elisabeth Gidengil, Neil Nevitte, and Joanna Everitt, “Corruption Was the Tipping Point.” *Globe and Mail*, February 1, 2006

Boston, Jonathan, 2003. “Institutional Change in a Small Democracy.” *Reforming Parliamentary Democracy*, ed. F. Leslie Seidle and David Docherty, editors. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press.

British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform, *Making Every Vote Count: The Case for Electoral Reform in British Columbia*. Victoria, December 2004.

Cody, Howard, 2005. “Electoral Reform Proposals in Quebec, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick.” *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 28 (2).

Davis, Murdoch, “Reformed Electoral System Not Just a Fad for B.C.” *Toronto Star*, September 17, 2005.

Delacourt, Susan, “Harper Moves on Election Reforms.” *Toronto Star*, May 31, 2006.

Duverger, Maurice, 1986. “Duverger’s Law: Forty Years Later,” *Electoral laws and their Political Consequences*, ed. Bernard Grofman and Arend Lijphart, New York: Agathon Press.

Gallagher, Michael, Michael Laver, and Peter Mair, 2006. *Representative Government in Modern Europe*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.

Gibson, Gordon. “BC Electoral Reform: Voters to Decide, Again.” *Policy Options*, October 2005.

Gordon, Larry, "Lessons for Ontario from B.C. on Election Reform." *Toronto Star*. May 20, 2005.

Gwyn, Richard, "Canada as a One-Party State." *Policy Options*, October 2001.

Ibbitson, John, "PR: Democracy You Can Really Trust." *Globe and Mail*, December 30, 2005.

Ibbitson, John, "What Caused Jump in Voter Turnout?" *Globe and Mail*, May 25, 2006.

Kinsella, Warren, 2001. *Kicking Ass in Canadian Politics*. Toronto: Random House.

Laycock, David, 2002. *The New Right and Democracy in Canada: Understanding Reform and the Canadian Alliance*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.

Lijphart, Arend, 1995. "Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma," *American Political Science Review* 91 (1).

Massicotte, Louis, 2001. "Changing the Canadian Electoral System." *Choices: Strengthening Canadian Democracy* 7 (1).

Milner, Henry, 2004 [I]. "First Past the Post? Progress Report on Electorate Reform Initiatives in Canadian Provinces." *Policy Matters* 5 (9).

Milner, Henry, "Reports of PR's Perils are Greatly Exaggerated." *Globe and Mail*, July 9, 2004 [II].

Milner, Henry, 2004 [III]. Editor, *Steps Toward Making Every Vote Count: Electoral System Reform in Canada and Its Provinces*. Peterborough: Broadview Press.

Milner, Henry, 1997. "Electoral Systems, Integrated Institutions and Turnout in Local and National Elections: Canada in Comparative Perspective." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* XXX (1).

Milner, Henry, 1999. "The Case for Proportional Representation in Canada." Henry Milner, editor, *Making Every Vote Count: Reassessing Canada's Electoral System*. Peterborough: Broadview Press.

Morris, Chris, "PEI Voters Soundly Reject Electoral Reform in Province-wide Plebiscite." *Canadian Press*, November 29, 2005.

Binoy Shanker Prasad, *Gandhi in the Age of Globalization* (Centre for Peace Studies, McMaster University: 2009) <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/gandhi>

Prasad, Binoy Shanker, "Caste, Regionalism, and Political Violence: Maoist Extremism in Nepal and Bihar." www.cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2005/Prasad.pdf

Prasad, Binoy Shanker, "The First Post-Bifurcation Parliamentary Election (2004) in Bihar and Jharkhand : A Comparative Study." www.cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2006/Prasad.pdf

Prasad, Binoy, "Bihar Elections 1999-2000, Business As Usual: Caste, Violence, Moribund Parties and Leadership," in Paul Wallace and Ramashray Roy, eds. *India's 1999 Elections and 21st Century Politics* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002) pp. 340-359

Prasad, Binoy Shanker, "Split the Votes and Win the Election: An Analysis of the 12th Lok Sabha Election in Bihar," in Ramashray Roy and Paul Wallace, eds. *Indian Politics and the 1998 Election: Regionalism, Hindutva and State Politics* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999) pp. 129-158

Prasad, Binoy S., "General Elections, 1996 Major Role of Caste and Social Factions in Bihar," in *Economic and Political Weekly* (Mumbai, India), Vol. XXXII, No. 46, November 22, 1997, pp. 3021-28

Prasad, Binoy Shanker, "Bihar: A Study of Parliamentary Election 1984," in R. S. Rajput, ed. *Dynamics of Democratic Politics in India: A Study of 1984 Lok Sabha Elections* (New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications, 1985) pp. 118-40

Sallot, Jeff. "How Harper Won the Election." *Globe and Mail*, January 23, 2006. www.globeandmail.com.

Sears, Robin V. "A Very Canadian Question of Balance." *Policy Options*, March 2006.

Skogstad, Grace, 2003. "Who Governs? Who Should Govern? Political Authority and Legitimacy in Canada in the Twenty-First Century." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 36 (5).

Studlar, Donley T., 2003. "Consequences of the Unreformed Canadian Electoral System." *American Review of Canadian Studies* 33 (3).

Thomson, Patrick and James Maunder. "Electoral Reform in BC: So Near and Yet So Far." *Policy Options*, October 2005.

Urquhart, Ian, "New B.C. Voting System Not Dead Yet." *Toronto Star*, May 21, 2005