

Doing Democracy Differently: Is it time for electoral reform in Canada?

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Lecture in Public Policy

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Questions to ask

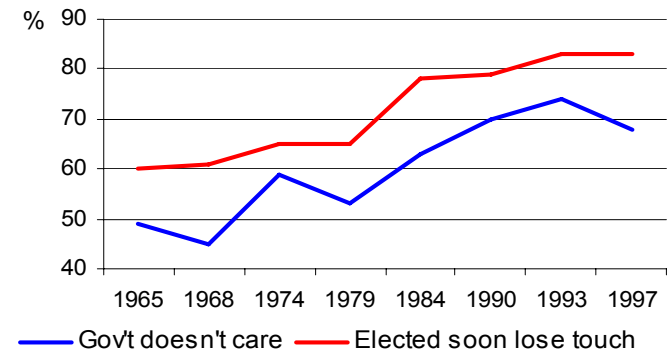
- Why talk about this ?
Is this really an important policy question
- Why now ?
How did it get on the agenda
- How do we do it ?
Who gets to change the rules of the game
- What should we do ?
Does everyone have a different scheme
- What prospects for real change ?
Is anything going to come of this

A democratic deficit

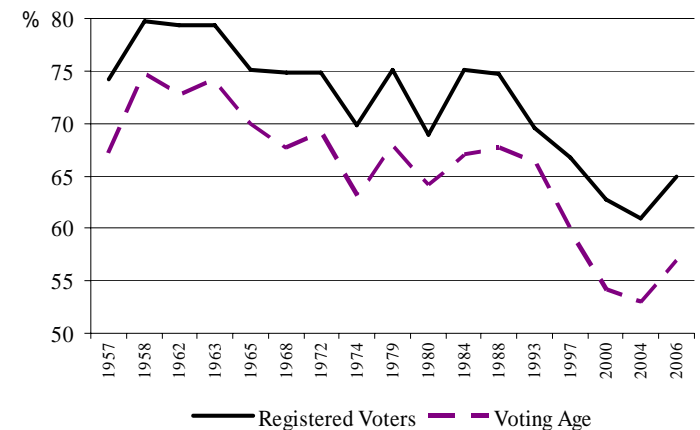
- Growing popular cynicism and distrust
- Declining trust in political parties
- Shrinking political party memberships
- Declining voter turnout

Is there something to be done?

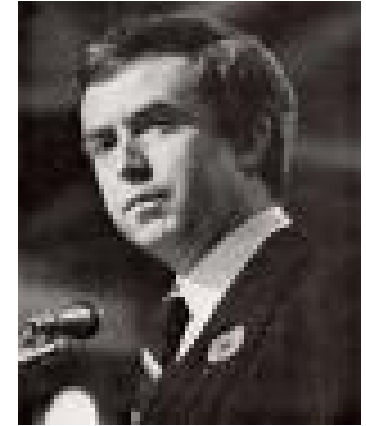
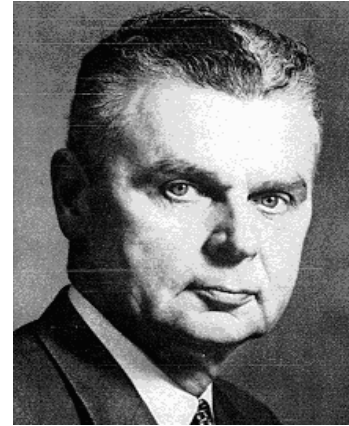
Growing Cynicism



Election Turnout: 1957- 2006



Pop Quiz



Q: What do these guys have in common?

Clue: 1896

1925

1957

1979

A: All became Prime Minister in an election where the “other fellow” got more votes!

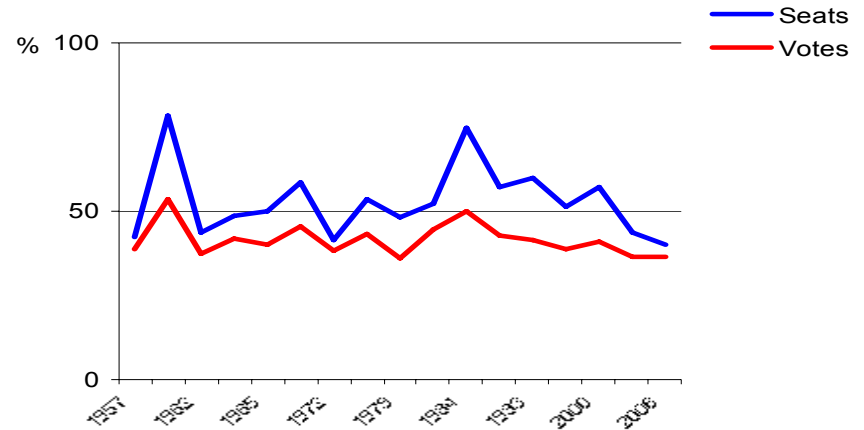
And more recent '*wrong winners*'

- *Clyde Wells* *LIB* Newfoundland & Labrador
- *Gerry Regan* *LIB* Nova Scotia
- *Richard Hatfield* *PC* New Brunswick
- *Daniel Johnson* *LIB* Quebec
 Lucien Bouchard *PQ*
- *David Peterson* *LIB* Ontario
- *Grant Devine* *PC* Saskatchewan
 Roy Romanow *NDP*
- *Glen Clark* *NDP* British Columbia

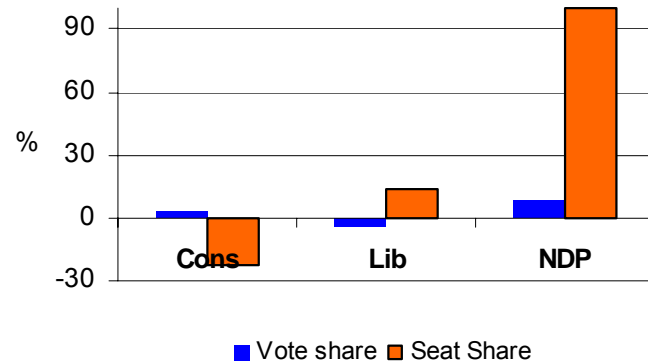
Election outcome *realities*

- No match between vote shares and seat share
- Government always gets a “bonus”
- No predictability or regular pattern in successive elections

Gov't's Votes & Seats Don't Match

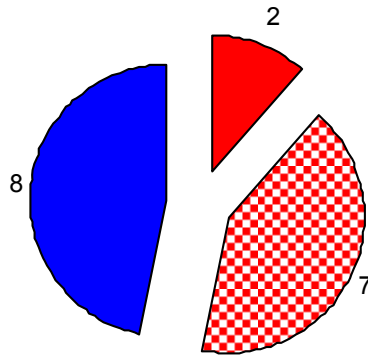


Seat-Vote connections: BC 2006



What sort of *governments* ?

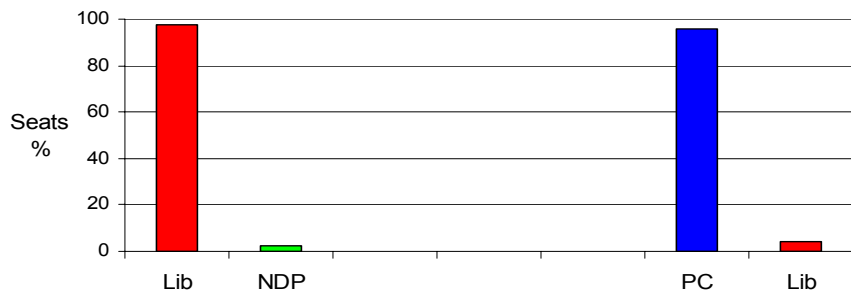
Canadian Governments 1957 ->



■ Earned Majorities ■ Artificial majorities ■ Minorities

BC 2001

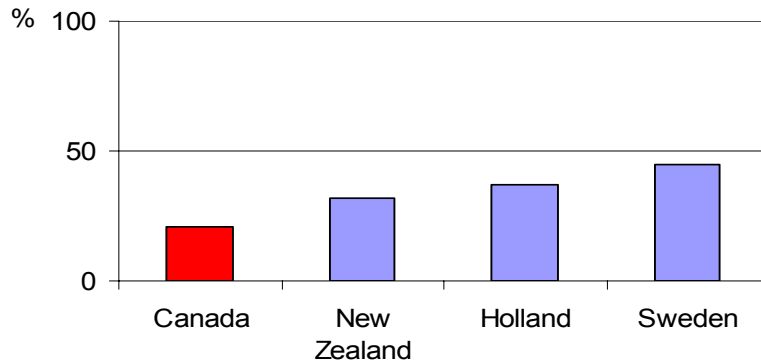
PEI 2000



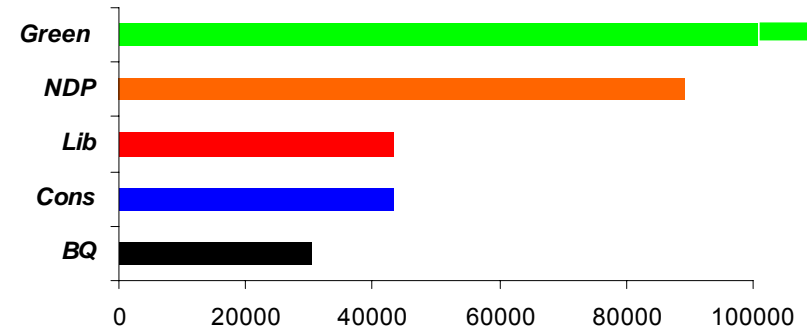
- No guarantee of majority government
- Most majorities are “artificial”
- Governments dominate provincial legislatures (1/4 have > 80% seats)

Unrepresentative parliaments *. . . unequal votes*

Women in National Parliaments



Votes per H of C seat: 2006



Women in parliament:
Canada ranks 44th

Party votes don't
count equally:

- **Bloc** treated best
- **Greens** shut out

Why these '*problems*' ?

Recall that . . .

- Elections designed to represent places, *not* parties, interests or even voters in the legislature
- Elections are “winner-take-all” in which losers are represented by their opponents
- No connection between a party’s votes and its seats
- Governments are chosen by legislatures (not voters)

Perhaps it is our ancient election system

But this is all *old news*. Why is it issue now ?

- Electoral reform is in the air
eastern Europe & established democracies
- Voter turnout, election outcomes & parliamentary composition
all vary under different electoral systems
- *Nationally*
Law Commission advocates change
Prime Ministers talk reform
Parliament considers how it might alter the system
- 5 *provinces* actively take up an electoral reform agenda:
BC *ONT* *QUE* *NB* *PEI*

In all cases a *Premier* driving the process in response to recognizable systemic failures !

Doing democracy differently

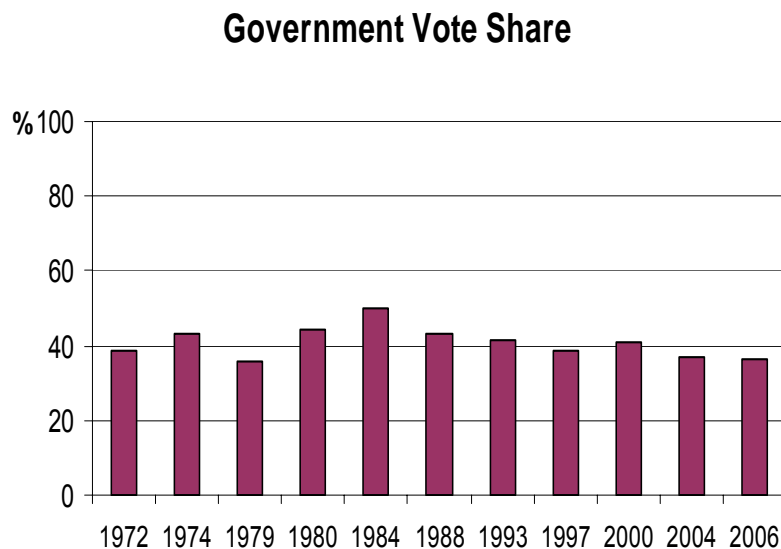
- Is defined as doing electoral politics differently
- Changing electoral politics requires changing electoral rules
- But not always for the same reasons
 - the nation and provinces see different problems
- Different societies : Different problems
 - * call up different approaches
 - * produce different solutions

Trying to do democracy differently

- Reform process taking place simultaneously
- Impulse to *proportionality* "PR", representing parties, not places
- Interest in systems that combine the old with the new
- Is the era of adversarial single-party government over ?
- Challenge belief that electoral reform is politicians' business

Time to reform national politics ?

- Fragmented party system
- Governments no longer have wide public support
- Turnout plunging despite more choices



- 2004 & 2006 elections represent the new norm
- Prospects for majority government now questionable
- Why not a system that represents voters' choices

Despite talk of electoral fairness & proportionality...

Canada's party politicians are still preoccupied with the problem of regionalism

- ❌ How to prevent regional fragmentation of national politics & parties
- ❌ How to ensure governing parties represent all the regions
- ❌ How to ensure regional parties are not favoured while still having single-party majority governments

With no 'solution' in sight nothing is being done

The provinces are *different*

They see their problems in distinctive terms
- different from Canada's, and from each others:

- *QUE*
 - the 'linguistic gerrymander'
- *PEI*
 - weak opposition & ineffective legislature
- *NB*
 - weak oppositions, rural governance & ethno-linguistic accommodation
- *ONT & BC*
 - political discontent and citizen alienation

Moving towards the same (*PR*) solution

Moving with global winds of change . . .

Quebec

defines the issue in terms of party fairness

Maritimers

simply call directly for more proportional legislatures

BC & Ontario

admit system failures and seek significant change

All imply adopting a new electoral principle

Two wrinkles to note

1. Electoral reform touches fundamental constitutional principles . . .

Elections belong to the public, not the politicians

—▶ *Referendum politics*

BC May 2005 & again in 2008; PEI Nov 2005; NB & ONT promised

2. No 2 countries use the same electoral system:
There is no 'perfect' system
Different electoral 'problems' lead to different solutions

Different agenda . . .

Different processes

- **QUE**
Fix the partisan distortions without disrupting province's political life
 - ↳ Assign *Technical Experts* to devise a solution
- **PEI & NB**
Ensure a viable opposition presence in the legislature
 - ↳ Appoint *Representative Commissions* to design reform
- **BC & ONT**
Engage citizens in democratizing their political system
 - ↳ Create *Citizen Assemblies* to invent preferred institutions

Different Processes . . .

Different Policy Proposals

QUE	small region PR, electors have 1 local vote
PEI	province-wide PR, electors have 2 votes
NB	big region PR, electors have 2 votes, politicians limited
BC	multi-Member district PR, voters list preferences

Different Policies . . .

Different Consequences

All would have *intended* consequence of producing proportional results:

- Majority governments might be the exception
- Coalition politics would develop

QUE	Stabilize existing party system. Increase safe seats.
PEI	Increase party leaders control over who gets elected. Make it harder to defeat senior politicians
NB	Increase regionalization of parties. Force politicians to choose focus.
BC	Increase voters' choices. Eliminate all safe seats. Stimulate internal party competition

Is there a story here?

- **Narrow, tightly defined agenda**
 - ↳ political & bureaucratic insiders
 - ↳ comparatively 'safe' reform
- **Middling agenda**
 - ↳ a representative commission
 - ↳ significant changes to existing system
- **Broad general goals**
 - ↳ give power to 'outsiders'
 - ↳ sweeping reform to system fundamentals

Long roads to change

Quebec's

narrow agenda - insider crafted - conservative proposal

VS.

BC's

wide agenda - outsider built - big change plan

No reason to think one is:

- better than the other
- more likely to lead to electoral reform

Each responds to the realities of their individual provincial political problems and possibilities

As we speak . . .

- Recognition current electoral processes are flawed
 - No agreement on a single alternative
 - The provinces have moved to consider unique systems to meet their distinctive political realities
 - Que holding public hearings
 - PEI a failed referendum
 - NB waiting for a Premier to act
 - BC 58% & going for more
- Ottawa talking vaguely about maybe doing something

Democracies in the federation

- Reform process may leave Canadians in different places using very different electoral systems
- This will increase the disconnect between political parties
 - from province to province
 - between federal & provincial politics in a province
- New electoral processes will
 - new legislatures
 - new patterns of governing
- No one way to do democracy
- Citizens' engagement opens possibilities . . .

Lessons from BC's Citizens' Assembly

- Citizens want to be involved in defining their political institutions
- 'Ordinary' citizens can figure out complex systems
- They can deliberate and reach value-based agreements on the most appropriate system for their community
- Citizens will define democratic problems, and solutions, differently than established elites

Towards a renewed democracy ?

- There is no guaranteed fix
- Electoral system change won't:
 - send voter turnout skyrocketing
 - convert political adversaries into buddies
 - eliminate voter cynicism
- A necessary first step for a broken system
- **Openness** to overdue change & recognition we don't all have to be the same our best hope for doing democracy differently