

# **Electoral System Reform in Canada: Objectives, Advocacy and Implications for Governance**

F. Leslie Seidle

## **Executive Summary**

October 2002

Discussion Paper F|28 is available at  
<http://www.cprm.org> or on request at (613) 567-7500

## Executive Summary

In the past few years, there has been a revival of academic study and political debate about electoral system reform in Canada. As was the case when the issue received attention in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the single-member plurality (SMP) system (often referred to as first-past-the-post) is criticized because its operation does not lead to “fair” party representation in the House of Commons, particularly from the country’s diverse regions. Advocates of change contend that a system based wholly or in large part on proportional representation (PR) would remedy such distortions. However, the critiques of SMP and reform proposals put forward by researchers and advocacy groups increasingly reflect additional objectives related to representation, citizen participation and governance. At the same time, interest in electoral reform has risen in a number of provinces.

Part 1 provides a survey of the contributions of academics, researchers, and federal and provincial political parties to recent debate about the electoral system, including proposals for alternative systems. This literature review demonstrates that links are increasingly being drawn between the electoral system and issues such as women’s representation, access to legislative representation, equality of voting power, turnout and the power of the executive. This critique reflects concerns about the broader political process and governance, notably with respect to civic participation and responsiveness in government.

In contrast to the debate some 20 years ago, a number of groups advocating electoral system reform have emerged. Part 2 includes profiles of four such groups: Fair Vote Canada, *Mouvement pour une démocratie nouvelle* (Quebec), Fair Voting BC and Every Vote Counts (Prince Edward Island). Drawing on interviews with a number of activists in these organizations, the discussion demonstrates that varying objectives motivate their activities but that they share certain concerns about representation and responsiveness in government. Part 2 also provides a review of the role certain civil society organizations played in setting the agenda for the adoption of alternative systems for the New Zealand House of Representatives and the assemblies created by devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. New Zealand’s Electoral Reform Coalition provides interesting lessons: relying on straightforward messages, the energy of its activists and extensive networking, it pressured the two leading parties to allow New Zealanders to decide if they wished to abandon SMP; following two referendums, a mixed proportional system (under which slightly more than half of MPs continue to be elected from constituencies by SMP) was instituted in 1996.

Drawing on the experience of the above-noted countries, Part 3 addresses the potential impact of electoral system reform in Canada. It is assumed that, should the opportunity arise, an electoral system along the lines of New Zealand’s would stand a greater chance of being adopted than a full PR system. The conclusion is that the adoption of such an electoral system could improve the representation of women and of smaller and newer parties. However, other factors, such as nomination practices, would also affect the degree to which parties elected more representative legislative delegations. The author also contends that it is unwise to expect a change of the electoral system alone to reverse declining civic participation, notably at elections. In his view, broader factors are at play, and various actions to foster public involvement are required.

As to the impact on government stability and effectiveness, it is suggested that the probable end of single-party majority governments could attenuate executive power by placing a premium on negotiation and inter-party bargaining. However, the author points out that the task of accommodating regional and other divisions would also enter the inter-party arena, rather than being carried out largely within the governing party. In his view, the federal government's capacity to act relatively decisively in governing a diverse and quite decentralized country would therefore depend on the stability of inter-party agreements or coalitions.

Important issues related to representation, civic participation and governance are being highlighted in the current debate on electoral system reform, which now includes a number of national and provincial advocacy groups. The paper concludes by welcoming these developments. In the author's view, these issues merit Canadians' deeper attention – both in the context of examining electoral rules and as part of a much-needed public dialogue on ways of strengthening the country's democratic processes as a whole.