

The False Majorities of First-Past-the-Post

David Moscrop

While the argument that our current first-past-the-post system is the electoral devil we know may resonate powerfully with people more or less content with the status quo, its democratic shortcomings present a persuasive counter-argument for proportional representation. David Moscrop, a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of British Columbia, presented that argument in a study for the Broadbent Institute, excerpted below.

Our current electoral system has been with us since before Confederation. That is, since before 1867. Before automobiles took over our streets, before light bulbs lit our rooms, and before tin cans filled our shelves. It is, with few exceptions, the process we have always used to elect legislatures in Canada. As a colony, we inherited the system from the United Kingdom, along with an unelected upper chamber (the Senate), the common law tradition, and many other legal, political, and cultural practices and institutions. The name “first-past-the-post” comes from a reference to horse racing, where the first horse to reach the finish line—or the “post”—wins. That horse gets to bask in sweet equine glory while the other horses return to the stable, heads hung low in shame.

Formally, FPTP is known as single-member plurality, since each riding or voting district elects a single member of Parliament, who is the candidate who receives the most votes during an election—though not necessarily a majority. In fact, in Canada, the winning candidate usually fails to receive a majority of votes cast. In the 2015 federal election, only 131 of 338 candidates received a majority of votes.

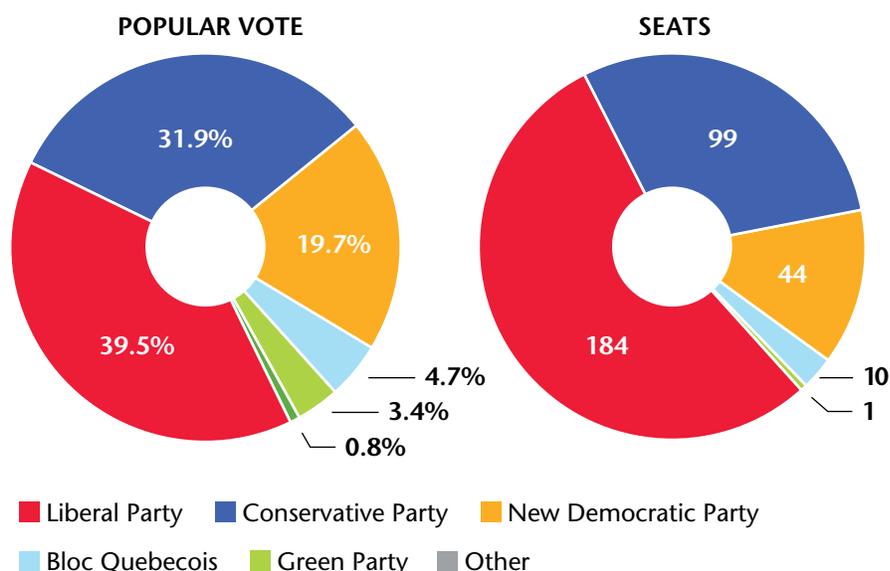
In the same election, the Liberal Party won a majority government of 184 seats (out of 338) with 39.5 per cent of the popular vote. When this happens, it’s sometimes called a “false majority.” Essentially, this false majority gives the Liberals overwhelming control of the House of Commons and the parliamentary agenda; it also gives them the ability to win

nearly any vote they wish, regardless of the fact that more than 60 per cent of Canadians voted for one of the opposition parties.

If this outcome seems imbalanced or unfair to you, keep in mind that previous election results have been even more distorted. In 1896, Charles Tupper’s Conservative Party lost the election to Wilfrid Laurier’s Liberals despite besting them in the popular vote (the total vote share) by nearly seven per cent. Laurier even ended up with a majority government. And his face on the five-dollar bill.

This happened again in 1957 and 1979. Once more, and once more again, the party with the second-highest vote share won the election. In each of these two cases, the winner came away with a minority government, having won less than half of the seats in the House of Commons, but

Figure 1: Breakdown of Seat Count and Popular Vote by Party, 2015.



more than any other party. In the case of the 1979 election, Pierre Trudeau, who was the Liberal Party leader at the time, lost the election to Joe Clark and his Conservatives despite receiving a hefty 482,760 more votes.

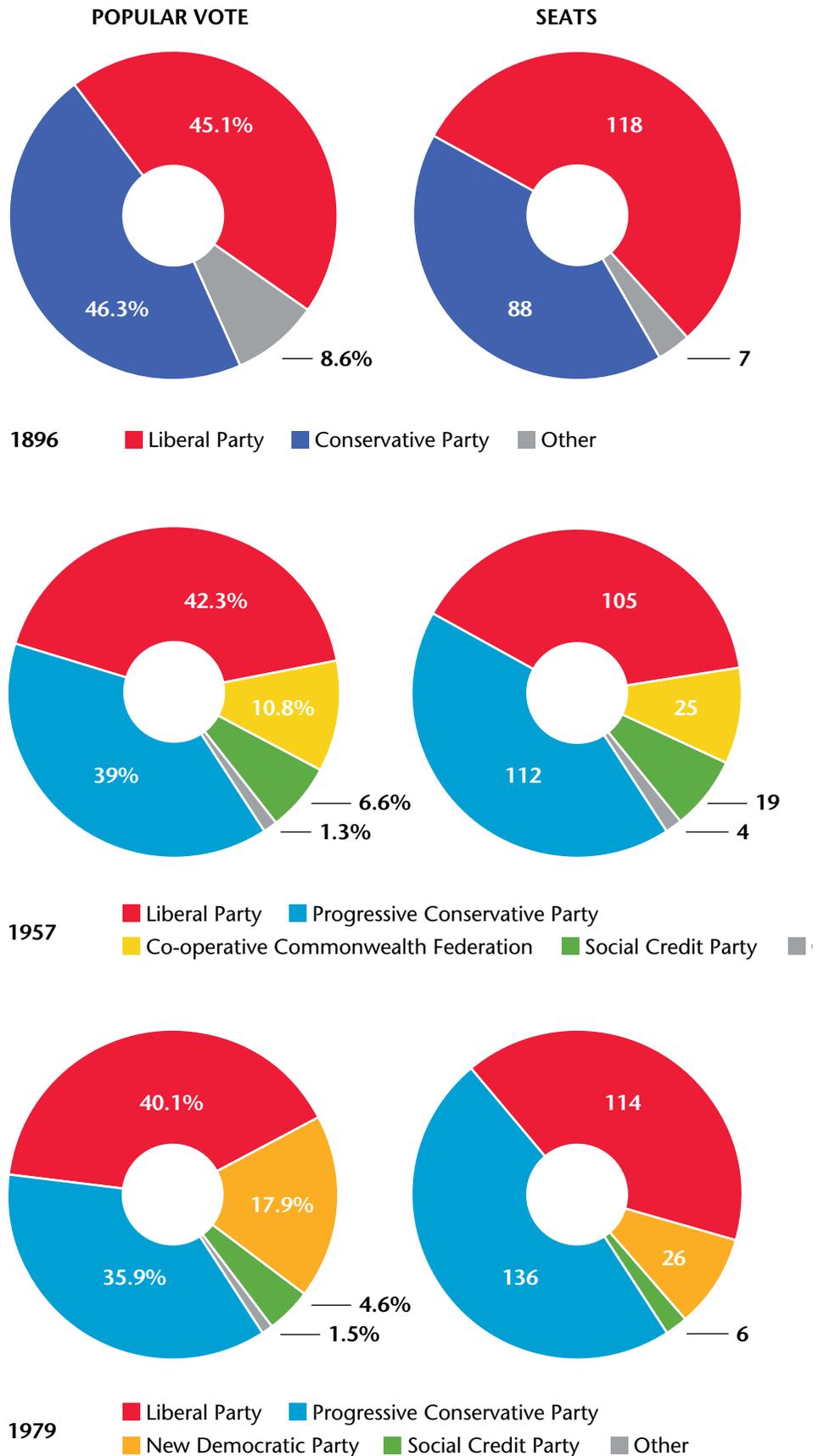
What if we imagined an election not as a horse race to be won or lost by one candidate or party, but as a pie to be divided? An electoral system based on or including elements of proportional representation (PR) is designed to ensure that the number of seats a party wins closely matches the percentage of votes it receives. If this idea seems fair and intuitive, that's because it is. It's in part for this reason that proportional electoral systems are the most commonly used systems in the world. In some countries with PR, there are few districts, while some have many more. For Canada, given that we are a large, highly diverse country in which many citizens, especially outside of our larger cities, have a strong attachment to geographical representation, any form of PR would likely include representation in local ridings, though they would probably be bigger than they are now.

A quick glance at the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network electoral systems map shows that about 38 per cent of countries use some form of PR—including approximately 85 per cent of countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In comparison, 26 per cent of countries throughout the world use FPTP, many of which are countries that also inherited the system from Great Britain.

In the 21st century, attitudes towards politics and democratic sensibilities have evolved to include more robust commitments to fairness, representativeness, and engagement. FPTP seems increasingly dusty in a world where our expectations for democracy are changing, fewer and fewer countries are using FPTP, and countries such as Canada have more than two major political parties.

Elections under PR are shared pies. Each party that receives a certain min-

Figure 2: Breakdown of Seat Count and Popular Vote by Party, 1896, 1957, 1979.



imum level of support gets a piece. While FPTP is a winner-take-all system, leaving nothing for those who fail to win, PR ensures that as many votes as possible count, and that election results closely match the popular vote. So, if a party wins 30 per cent of the vote, it receives roughly 30 per cent of the seats.

In December 2015, Abacus Data released a poll commissioned by the Broadbent Institute. It found that while some Canadians—17 per cent—are comfortable with the current system, a majority believe that our electoral system needs some kind of change. This includes 42 per cent who said there need to be major or complete changes to the system. The poll also showed that 38 per cent of respondents have either considered not voting or have stayed home because they felt that their vote wouldn't change the outcome of their local election. And nearly half of Canadians—46 per cent—indicated that they had voted for a party that wasn't their first choice in order to prevent another party from winning (that is, they voted "strategically").

All of this might help explain why Canadians, by nearly a two-to-one margin (44 per cent to 24 per cent), believe that the Trudeau government should make good on its election promise to change the electoral system. However, 32 per cent had no clear views. Furthermore, 52 per cent of respondents indicated that electoral reform wasn't important to them, including 12 per cent who "couldn't care less" about it. This suggests that there's an important opportunity to reach out to and engage Canadians on an issue that affects us all.

Respondents identified a variety of features they want in an electoral system. They tended to favour an electoral system that has a simple ballot and that produces strong, stable governments with a local member of Parliament—features consistent with FPTP, but that can also be features of PR systems. However, many also indicated a desire for a system in which

the makeup of Parliament reflects the support a party has throughout the country and in which seats won in Parliament reflect the proportion of votes each party receives nationally—two things our current system does not do well, but that PR does very well.

When asked which electoral system they preferred, 44 per cent of respondents chose a proportional system—either pure proportional representation or a mixed-member system—and 43 per cent chose the current system. This indicates a pretty stark divide between FPTP and PR proponents, though we can't be sure how deep or persistent that divide is. What we do know is that the system we now use is more familiar to Canadians, and that people tend to prefer things that are familiar to them. It's likely true that the more Canadians learn about proportional representation, the more they will become comfortable with it, especially once they learn about the virtues of proportionality: fairness, representativeness, and engagement.

Today, a rare and critical window is open for Canadians to engage in the debate over electoral reform, to advocate for an electoral system that includes proportionality, and to seize the opportunity for change.

Our FPTP system does a bad job at translating the votes of Canadians into a distribution of seats that matches the preferences of voters. Instead, it pro-

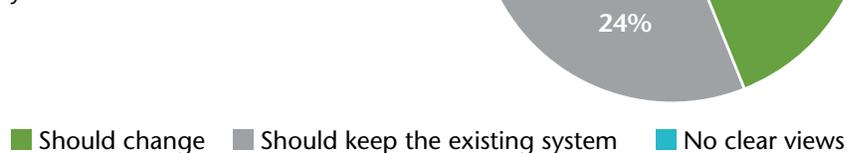
duces distorted outcomes, perverse incentives, and wasted votes. It's unfair, it's unrepresentative of certain populations, and it contributes to disengagement.

Plenty of races are won by a narrow margin with losing candidates receiving significant support. Some are close two-way races, some are close three-way races, and occasionally, there are even close four-way races. But winning candidates often come away with full control of a single seat in their district after winning by a narrow margin. In 2011, for instance, 93 seats—nearly a third of all seats—were won by a margin of 10 per cent or less, including 52 that were won by five per cent or less. In the 2015 contest, there were 22 ridings where the margin of victory was 1.5 per cent or less, including one race where the winning margin was 0.1 per cent.

When a result like the example above happens in a single riding, it's a bad day for the losing candidate or candidates and those who voted for them. But when it happens across the country, it produces the pronounced distorted outcome of a false majority. This is when a party receives a majority of seats in Parliament without a majority of the popular vote. And it happens a lot. In fact, since the end of the First World War—around the time when third parties became more established—Canadian elections have produced 18 majority governments, and only *four* of those received a majority of the popular vote.

Figure 3

Do you personally think that the Liberal government should change Canada's voting system, that it should keep the existing system, or you have no clear views on this?



Aside from false majorities, our current system can also result in distorted outcomes for opposition or third parties, while entirely shutting out smaller parties. In 1997, the Reform Party and the Progressive Conservative Party received almost the same share of votes—the Reform Party received less than one per cent more than the Progressive Conservative Party. However, the Reform Party won 40 more seats. And in the same

election, the Bloc Québécois, whose support was geographically concentrated in Quebec, won twice as many seats as the New Democrats, despite receiving *fewer votes*.

Results like this happen because FPTP tends to punish small parties whose support is spread out across the country, while it rewards those whose support is geographically concentrated (and it can have the opposite effect on large parties). That’s how the Bloc

Québécois became the Official Opposition in 1993 despite electing no members of Parliament outside Quebec, receiving *less than 14 per cent of the popular vote*, and taking in fewer votes (by more than 700,000) than the third-place Reform Party. It’s also how the Green Party of Canada, whose support is more geographically spread out, has received only one seat in two of the last five elections, and none in the other three, despite receiving between three and seven per cent of votes cast in each contest. (In a proportional system with similar popular returns, the party would likely have come away with 10–20 seats.)

[Distorted outcomes and wasted votes not only correlate with, and possibly cause, lower voter turnout, but may also lead to lower perceptions of fairness, efficacy, and the responsiveness of the system—especially among those who tend to get shut out of the current one. They certainly result in fewer women being elected (and sometimes candidates from minority backgrounds, though FPTP can also favour candidates from minority groups that are geographically concentrated).

Plenty has changed since Confederation. We now have 10 provinces and three territories. The country is vastly more diverse. We have penicillin and cars and the Internet. We have higher expectations about how our government ought to engage with and represent us.

And today, we also have the rare opportunity to adopt an electoral system better suited to the preferences, challenges, and standards of the 21st century. We ought to use that opportunity to choose an electoral system that is fair, representative, and engaging. Canadian democracy and those who live under it deserve nothing less. **P**

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Figure 4: False Majorities in Federal Elections.

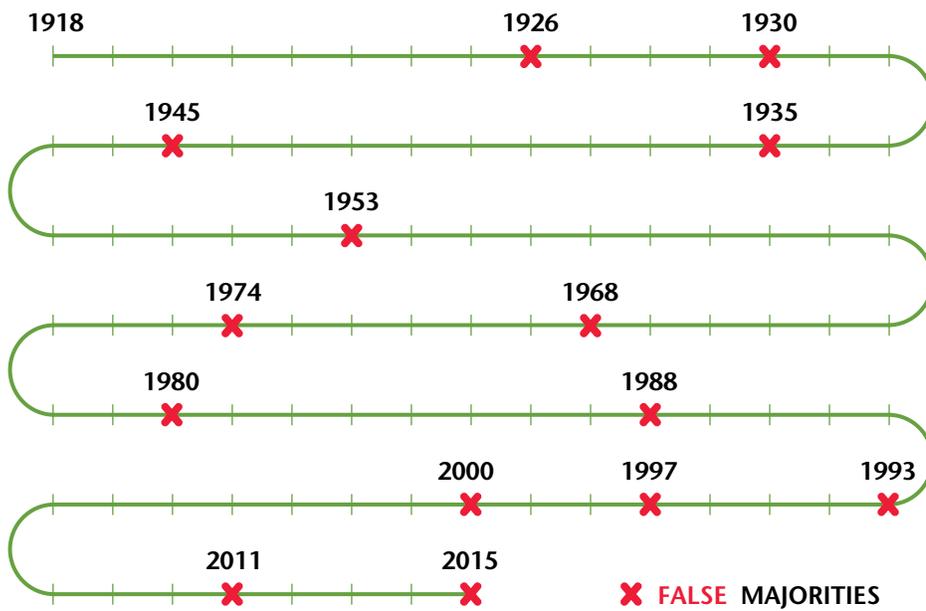


Figure 5: Election Results by Party, Popular Vote Raw and Percentage, 1993.

