

A photograph of the British Columbia Legislature building, a grand neoclassical structure with a large central dome and multiple smaller domes, set against a clear sky. The image is partially obscured by geometric shapes in red, blue, and yellow.

The Impact of Proportional Representation on British Columbia's Legislature and Voters

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Executive Summary

In November 2018 British Columbia will be holding a referendum on changing the province's electoral system to a form of proportional representation (PR).

Proponents advocating for the change to a PR electoral system argue that the current system is unfair because it disproportionately allocates more seats to certain parties than the proportion of votes that those party receive, and also potentially leads to minority views being underrepresented. However, this single-minded critique of the current system is overly simplistic since it focuses only on the benefits of proportionality and ignores the many inevitable tradeoffs involved in a proportional system.

Indeed, changing the electoral system to a form of PR would undoubtedly lead to both planned and unforeseen changes that would affect how the government functions, how public policy is made, and would influence representation and voter accountability, among other matters.

Consider first how a shift to a PR electoral system would affect the composition of BC's legislature. As the electoral institutions and party incentives began to shift, the province's legislature would become more fragmented, meaning that more parties would be represented in the legislature.

While proponents of PR see the situation where more parties are receiving representation and the positive effect that this has on proportionality as a positive development, there are a number of drawbacks with a more fragmented legislature. One drawback is the types of parties that can be elected. As more parties receive seats in PR electoral systems, the effective threshold for parties to get elected is lower, which often leads to fringe or extreme parties on both the left and right of the political spectrum receiving a greater share of seats than would similar parties in our current electoral system.

PR proponents also contend that a more fragmented legislature will allow for a greater representation of minority views. However, it is incorrect to assume that minority views are not well represented in FPTP electoral systems. While the influence of minority views is more explicit under PR electoral rules due to the higher frequency with which coalition governments are formed, minority views are still represented in plurality

and majoritarian systems, because no single party can gain the widespread support that would allow them to govern in such systems without building a coalition of both large and small societal groups. In other words, the parties and their platforms in majoritarian and plurality systems must be broad enough to appeal to a number of constituent groups.

Another way of thinking of this is that many different voter blocs, including those that represent minority views, tend to get a little bit of some of their policy preferences, but not all of them. As a result, majoritarian and plurality electoral systems lead to more moderate policy platforms. This type of coalition-building within the party system creates more stable governments than is the case under a PR system because the varying factions within the party are more likely to compromise than if they were in separate parties.

A further consequence of a more fragmented legislature is that coalition governments, as opposed to majority governments, will most likely become the norm for British Columbia. Coalition governments in BC could lead to greater policy uncertainty due to the ambiguity over which parties may form the coalition and the time that it can take to form a coalition government.

Finally, a shift to a PR electoral system in BC could lead to a poorer representation of voters' views, while also making it more difficult for British Columbians to hold their politicians to account.

Given the wide-ranging effects that a change to BC's electoral system would have, debates about electoral reform need to be expanded, and governments and citizens should consider a broader set of evaluative criteria when determining whether changing the province's electoral system is necessary or prudent.

Introduction

British Columbia's supply and confidence agreement between the New Democratic Party (NDP) and the BC Green Party was the catalyst for The Electoral Reform Referendum 2018 Act, which specifies that the government must hold a referendum on changing the province's electoral system to a form of proportional representation (PR) by November 2018. If successful, BC would be the first province in decades to shift away from using the first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system to translate votes into seats in the provincial legislature.¹

Proponents advocating for the change to a PR electoral system argue that the current system is unfair because it disproportionately allocates more seats to certain parties than the proportion of votes that those party receive, and also potentially leads to minority views being underrepresented.² However, this single-minded critique of the current system that PR proponents have put forth is simplistic because it only considers the issue of proportionality and ignores the many inevitable tradeoffs that changing to a proportional system involves.

Indeed, changing the electoral system to a form of PR would undoubtedly lead to both planned and unforeseen changes that would affect how the government functions, how public policy is made, and would influence representation and voter accountability, among other matters.

This study takes a comprehensive look at how a shift to PR could affect British Columbia, focusing particularly on the effects that PR would have on the composition of the legislature, the formation of government, and on voter representation and political accountability.

¹ British Columbia is one of only a few provinces that have used different electoral systems in its history. For example, in the early 1950s, BC briefly used an Alternative Vote electoral system in a few provincial elections before returning to FPTP (see Jansen, 2004).

² For an overview of the views proponents have of the different systems, see Blais (1991), Norris (1997), Norris (2004), and Lijphart (2012).

Composition of the Legislature

One often overlooked consequence of PR systems is that they result in party fragmentation in the legislature. As long ago as 1954, Maurice Duverger pointed out that the choice of an electoral system has consequences for the party system. His insight can be expressed as a maxim: plurality/majoritarian electoral systems tend to produce a “two-party system,” whereas PR systems tend to result in “multi-partism” (pp. 217, 239). Duverger’s insights about the dual nature of party competition in majoritarian and plurality electoral systems are evident in British Columbia. In the last two decades, BC’s elections have effectively been competitions between the New Democratic Party (NDP) and the BC Liberal Party, with these two parties accounting for, on average, 83 percent of the popular vote in elections. Moreover, only when a third party was able to win seats did wide distortions in the popular vote compared with electoral seats become evident. For example, in the 1996 election, the Liberal Party won 33 (out of 75) seats despite receiving a higher percentage of popular votes.³ Two small parties, the Progressive Democratic Alliance and the Reform Party of British Columbia, won three seats. The splintering of the vote that arose from multi-party competition was what distorted the vote, not the electoral system itself.

Political parties that are able to attract only small percentages of the popular vote are normally based on single issues (environmental parties, for instance), regional considerations, or perhaps extreme ideological preferences (in BC, for instance, a Communist Party is still registered). By changing to a PR system, smaller parties that are unable to gain traction in the FPTP system would then be able to secure seats because of the way in which the PR electoral system allocates seats. In other words, under a FPTP system, a single-issue or regional party that received 5 percent of the vote would be unable to secure seats in the legislature, whereas the same party with the same narrow focus would obtain seats under PR. A PR elec-

³ The Liberals won approximately 42 percent of the popular vote compared to the NDP winning approximately 40 percent of the popular vote.

toral system thus results in the formation of more single-issue parties and an increasing splintering of the vote.

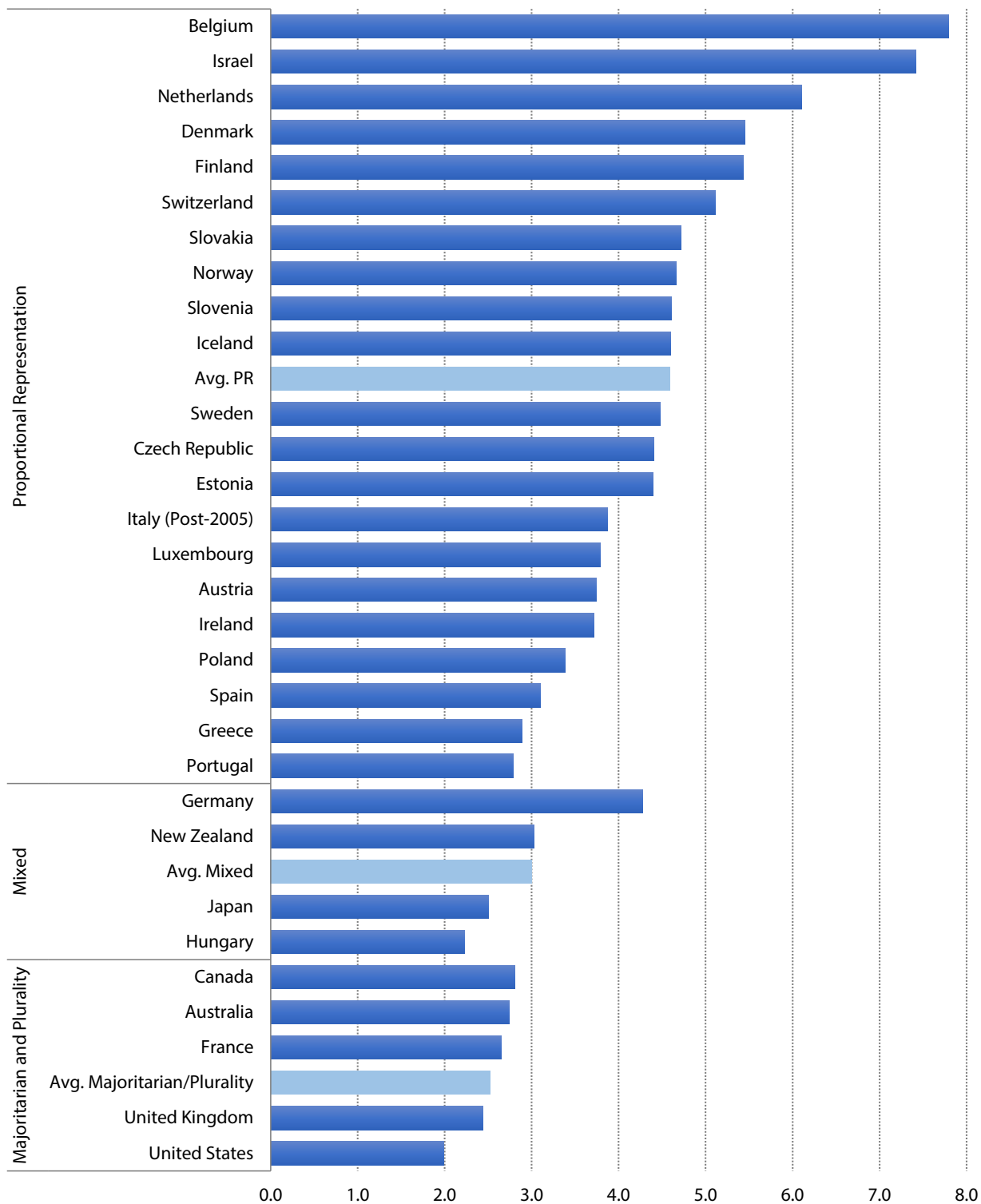
Duverger's analysis largely fits the empirical data of the national legislatures in our sample of countries. When analyzing the number of parties in legislatures, it is important to account for the relative size of the parties so as to not bias the results. To do this, Laakso and Taagepera (1979) developed a measure known as the effective number of parliamentary parties (ENPP). This measure is commonly used in comparative politics research as a means for controlling for the effects of very small parties (for example a party that runs one candidate in one constituency) and parties that are unequal in size. The estimate is based on the seat share a party received in a given election. The estimator can be expressed as $N_s = \frac{1}{\sum s_i^2}$, where s_i is the seat share of the i -th party (Laakso and Taagepera, 1979).

Figure 1 presents the average ENPP of 30 countries for elections from 2000 to 2017. On average, countries with plurality or majoritarian electoral rules had an ENPP of 2.5. This compares to an average ENPP of 3.0 in countries with mixed electoral systems, and an average ENPP of 4.6 in countries with PR, meaning that there are on average two more parliamentary parties in PR electoral systems than in majoritarian systems. In other words, the same country with the same electorate and the same values would have a significantly different number of parties in the legislature solely as a result of its electoral system.

It is worth noting that within the three electoral family types, there is a wide variation in the ENPP among countries. Most notably, this is the case within the PR electoral family. For example, the PR country with the largest ENPP is Belgium at 7.8, while Portugal has the lowest ENPP of PR countries at 2.8. Such a wide range makes it difficult to project the level of fragmentation in the BC legislature should that province switch to a PR electoral system.⁴ Indeed, the exact ENPP of a jurisdiction depends on other electoral system characteristics beyond simply the electoral formula, including the vote threshold or district magnitude in addition to various

⁴ That being said, if we assume that BC switches to a PR system and that there is no endogenous shift in votes, we can at least get a sense of the direction that BC's ENPP would be headed. For example, after the 2017 election, BC's ENPP was 2.1. However, the effective number of parties based on vote share after the 2017 election was 2.8. This number would more closely align with BC's ENPP under a PR system since votes would be more closely aligned to seats, although the ENPP would likely be even larger once the electoral institutions associated with PR were implemented and party and voter behaviour adjusted to the new electoral system. Nevertheless, this analysis does provide a clear indication of the direction in which legislature fragmentation would head should BC shift to a PR electoral system.

Figure 1: Average Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties for Elections Between 2000 and 2017



Sources: Döring and Manow (2016); Inter-Parliamentary Union (n.d.).

social cleavages⁵ present within the polity and other socio-political variables (see Neto and Cox, 1997). Despite this, the preceding analysis indicates with some certainty that if BC switches to a PR electoral system, the province's legislature will become more fragmented. Moreover, given some of the social heterogeneity present in BC (for example, the urban-rural divide, voters who are environmentally focused vs. resource development focused, etc.), it is more likely that BC would have an ENPP closer to the average for PR countries rather than on the lower end of the spectrum.

That PR electoral rules lead to a more fragmented legislature should not come as a surprise. In fact, larger district sizes or “magnitudes,” and PR electoral formulae are the central ways by which PR electoral systems attain a more proportionate allocation of seats to votes than do plurality or majoritarian electoral systems.⁶ While this seat allocation ratio is often viewed positively by PR proponents, a more fragmented legislature also brings with it a number of drawbacks. One such drawback is the type of party that can be elected. As a greater number of parties receive seats in PR electoral systems, the effective threshold for parties to get elected is lower, which often leads to fringe or extreme parties on both the left and right of the political spectrum receiving a greater share of seats than they would in majoritarian and plurality systems. Research has also found that different electoral systems provide differing ideological incentives for parties. The results typically suggest that PR electoral systems tend to give political parties an incentive to take ideological positions that are more polarized or further away from the median voter, which results in a more polarized party system than is the case in majoritarian and plurality systems (Downs, 1957; Cox, 1990; Dow, 2001, 2010; Calvo and Hellwig, 2011; Hug and Martin, 2012; Catalinac, 2018). The result is greater difficulty in making inter-party compromises or, reciprocally, a greater likelihood of legislative deadlock.

Internal versus external coalitions

A more polarized party system could lead to important policy implications, should BC shift to a form of PR. Proponents of PR argue that party ideological diffusion away from the polity's center is one of the system's benefits because it allows for a greater representation of minority views. This argument assumes that minority views are not well represented in

⁵ Cleavages refer to the various divisions in society such as ethnicity, language, religion, union membership, rural vs. urban, etc. (see Neto and Cox, 1997).

⁶ For comparisons of the relative proportionality or disproportionality of different electoral systems, see Lijphart (2012) and Norris (2004).

FPTP electoral systems. This is misleading because all “democratic government is coalition government” (Bawn and Rosenbluth, 2006: 251). In PR electoral systems, parties often represent more narrow interests and no party tends to receive a majority government. As a result, and in order to govern, parties have to form explicit, multi-party coalitions after elections. Smaller parties that might represent more minority views may become members of the governing coalition, allowing them to have an impact on the government’s policy decisions. While the influence of minority views is more explicit in PR electoral systems, minority views are still represented in plurality and majoritarian systems because no single party can gain the widespread support that would enable it to govern in such systems without building a coalition of both large and small groups in society. In other words, the parties in majoritarian and plurality systems and their platforms must be broad enough to appeal to number of constituent groups. As an example, consider the coalition that currently makes up BC Liberal party voters. As the dominant center-right party in the province, the Liberals must create a platform that appeals to those voters who tend to coalesce, in varying degrees, to the right of the political spectrum—including moderate centrists, fiscal conservatives, social conservatives, and libertarians, among others. To attract as many voters as possible, the Liberals need to have a platform strong enough to appeal to all of the disparate groups, but not so strong in one particular area as to turn off other voters not motivated by that policy area. Another way of thinking of this is that many different voter blocs, including those representing minority views, tend to get a little bit of some of their policy preferences, but not all of them. As a result, majoritarian and plurality electoral systems lead to more moderate policy platforms. This type of coalition-building within the party system creates more stable governments because the varying factions within the party are more likely to compromise than if they were in separate parties.

Coalition Governments

One main effect of the more fragmented legislatures that result under PR electoral rules is that it becomes more difficult for a single party to attain a majority of the seats in a legislature. For example, Blais and Carty (1987) found that the probability of having a one-party majority government under PR electoral rules was effectively zero. As a result, multiple parties have to enter into coalitions in order to govern, which brings additional consequences.

Should BC shift its electoral system to PR, one of the more dramatic consequences will be a shift in the type of government that is most often formed. Indeed, our sample of countries clearly shows the effect that different electoral systems have on the type of government that is formed—primarily a single-party majority or a coalition government. Based on our sample of national elections, between 2000 and 2017, only 23 percent of elections in countries with majoritarian or plurality electoral systems resulted in coalition governments,⁷ with an average of 2.3 parties participating in the coalition. In mixed electoral systems, 95 percent of elections resulted in coalition governments, and there were, on average, 2.6 parties in each coalition. In countries with PR-based electoral systems, 87 percent of elections resulted in coalition governments. PR electoral systems also had the highest average number of parties in the coalition at 3.3 (table 1).

The far greater need to form coalition governments in countries with PR (and mixed) electoral systems interacts with the greater propensity for small and fringe parties to be elected, in that such parties are needed by the larger parties to form coalition governments. This creates situations where smaller, single-issue, fringe, ethnic, and/or regional parties are able to exert proportionally *more* power in government than their vote total would suggest because the larger parties need their elected members to form a governing coalition. This proportionally greater power for small parties results in policies favoured by these parties being enacted by the

⁷ This result was heavily influenced by Australia, where four out of six elections in the period culminated in a coalition government due to a long-standing coalition between the Liberal Party of Australia and the National Party of Australia.

Table 1: Coalition Government Statistics, OECD Countries, 2000-2017

| | Majoritarian/ Plurality | Mixed | Proportional Representation |
|--|----------------------------|-------|--------------------------------|
| Percent of election resulting in coalition governments | 23% | 95% | 87% |
| Average number of parties in a coalition | 2.3 | 2.6 | 3.3 |

Sources: Döring and Manow (2016); Inter-Parliamentary Union (n.d.)

government as a condition of the small parties' support for the coalition in government, even though such policies were rejected by the overwhelming majority of the electorate.⁸

⁸ An example of this dynamic may be currently playing out in BC. As mentioned above, after the 2017 election, a supply and confidence agreement between the BC NDP and Green Party enabled the NDP to form government. The NDP currently has 41 seats in the Legislature, while the Greens have 3. A possible example of the smaller party exercising a disproportionate amount of power can be seen over the issue of producing natural gas and exporting it to global markets as liquified natural gas (LNG). Recently, Green Party leader Andrew Weaver threatened to take down the NDP government for its apparent support of LNG development by withdrawing from the coalition and ushering forward a non-confidence vote, which in all likelihood would result in a new election (Hunter, 2018, Jan.18). The NDP has previously indicated that it would continue to support LNG development, which puts the two coalition members at odds (Bailey, 2017, July 23). The issue of disproportionate influence comes from a comparison of the Green Party's support from the previous election and general support for the development of an LNG industry in the province. In BC's 2017 election, the Green Party received just under 17 percent of the popular vote, but in a 2013 survey, 50 percent of British Columbians supported the development and export of LNG. In a 2016 survey, fewer British Columbians supported LNG development, with only 43 percent indicating they did so (41 percent were against), although more British Columbians were still in favour of LNG development than those who were against. In both surveys, a greater proportion of British Columbians supported LNG development than the percentage that voted for the Green Party (Hoekstra, 2016, Mar. 23). While it remains to be seen whether the current government will dissolve over this issue, the case illustrates how it is possible for a smaller party to exert a disproportionate amount of power in a coalition government. In addition and on the issue of disproportionate influence by small parties in coalition governments, a wide body of research, notably that of Persson and Tabellini (2003), has found that policy capitulations from large parties

Another concern with coalition governments is policy uncertainty. In an analysis of uncertainty in BC from January 2009 to July 2017, Miljan (2017) found that the 2017 BC election resulted in the highest level of uncertainty in the period. This high level of uncertainty was also sustained over a relatively longer time than had been seen elsewhere in that period. Heightened uncertainty largely stemmed from issues surrounding which party the Green Party would support and the policy direction that this would take the province. Miljan (2017) went on to conclude that should British Columbia shift to a PR electoral system, policy uncertainty following elections would likely increase, as the probability of an election resulting in a coalition government would increase substantially.⁹

Uncertainty could also be heightened during the periods when the coalition governments are being formed, since the outcome and policy direction of the government will be unclear. For example, the average number of days between the election and the formation of the first coalition cabinet in our sample of countries that use PR electoral rules was approximately 50 days (see table 2). The longest time between the election and cabinet formation was 541 days in Belgium after its 2010 election. On the few occasions when the election results were essentially status quo, cabinets continued on because they needed no great reformation. It took less time, on average, in countries with mixed electoral systems to form their first post-election cabinets, likely owing to the fact that there were, on average, fewer members in the cabinet under mixed electoral rules when compared to PR. However, these types of systems can also result in long periods between the election and cabinet formation. Notably, Germany has just finalized a very long coalition bargaining period. Germany's most recent election took place on September 24, 2017, but bargaining to form a cabinet only concluded on March 4, 2018, 161 days after the election. Since most elections that use plurality or majoritarian electoral rules result in majority governments, the potentially long gaps between the election

in coalitions with small parties is one of the reasons that government spending is higher in countries with PR electoral systems (that is, in countries with elections more frequently resulting in coalition governments), compared to majoritarian and plurality electoral systems (see, Clemens et al., 2016).

⁹ High levels of policy uncertainty can have an impact on the economy and investment because investors perceive investments in such jurisdictions to be riskier, and therefore they might hold back their investment capital until the uncertainty subsides, or invest in another jurisdiction altogether. As an example, given the uncertainty surrounding the development of LNG in BC, particularly given the Green Party's vociferous position, firms looking to invest large sums of capital into LNG exports may withhold their investments, or invest elsewhere, such as in the United States or Australia, which do not have the same level of policy uncertainty surrounding the industry.

Table 2: Number of Days Between Election and First Coalition Cabinet Formation

| Electoral System | Mean | Max | Min |
|-----------------------------|-------------|------------|------------|
| Mixed | 32 | 86 | 9 |
| Proportional Representation | 50 | 541 | 0 |

Sources: Döring and Manow (2016); Inter-Parliamentary Union (n.d.)

and government formation (when policy uncertainty can be high) do not occur often. To repeat, long periods between elections and government formation add to uncertainty, which has evident economic consequences. British Columbia might be susceptible to long bargaining periods if there is a high degree of fragmentation in the legislature. As noted in the preceding section, there is a real possibility that this could be the case in BC if the province shifts to a PR electoral system, given the number of social and political cleavages that already exist in the province. If BC had to engage in protracted negotiations to form a coalition government, this could have serious adverse effects on government stability and policy uncertainty.

Many issues can stem from coalition governments, which would likely be the norm if BC changed its electoral system to PR or a mixed system, and this section has analyzed some of them. One such issue results from the greater presence of small parties in the legislature under PR and mixed system electoral rules compared to plurality and majoritarian rules. A common critique of plurality and majoritarian electoral rules is that they dispense a disproportionate amount of power to larger parties, which can lead to one party receiving a majority government without receiving a majority of the votes. However, the converse can be true in PR electoral systems, where small parties can receive disproportionate amounts of power. In some situations, this can happen because the large parties need the support of the small parties to govern in a coalition. This can lead the larger parties to capitulate on areas of policy that the small parties prefer and which only a small minority of the population may support, thus granting the small party a disproportionate amount of power. In addition, coalition governments may create more policy uncertainty in jurisdictions with PR electoral rules compared to jurisdictions operating under plurality

or majoritarian rules, as BC now does, due to the uncertainty over which parties will form the coalition and the time that it can take to form the coalition government.

Representation and Accountability under PR Electoral Rules

There are two final criteria that ought to be evaluated in the context of BC's potential change to its electoral system: (1) how different electoral institutions may affect the representation of voters; and (2) the translation of voter preferences into policy and the accountability of elected leaders.

The effective representation of voter preferences is a key component of a well-functioning democracy. Some proponents of PR argue that this form of electoral system has a clear advantage when it comes to effectively representing the diverse views of voters. Their logic is that the negotiation of coalition governments allows for the inclusion of more viewpoints and that this will produce policy that is closer to what the median voter wants.¹⁰ However, recent research suggests that this may not be true (for example, Blais and Bodet, 2006; Lowen, 2017). For example, Loewen (2017) gives three reasons why PR electoral systems are not necessarily more representative of voter preferences.

First, when coalition negotiations are taking place, there is no guarantee that power and the policies of the government will be divided in such a way that they represent the views of the average voter. Distortions or disproportionate amounts of influence are just as likely to result from the coalition bargaining process. In other words, the exertion of disproportionate power by small, even fringe parties, can result in the adoption of policies that the overwhelming majority of voters reject, so in fact they are far from the median voter's preferences.

Second, since coalitions are formed on tight policy bargains and capitulations between the coalition partners, a coalition government could find itself less able to shift to the changing views of the median voter following the negotiations.

Third, in PR systems, cabinets do not last as long as they do in plurality and majoritarian systems. Specifically, between elections coalition governments are more susceptible to changes in key cabinet members, or in coalition parties. These types of changes tend to be related to shifts in

¹⁰ For more on this view, see Lijphart (2012).

the policy direction of the government, which could move government policy either away from or toward the median voter (which, in the latter case, would mean that the government was farther away from the ideal point in the first place). Loewen (2017) contrasts this with the relatively swift ability of single-party majority governments to move closer the median voter or the policy preferences of the majority without the fear of an immediate reprisal, for example, in the form of a destabilized coalition. Such nimbleness can allow single-party governments to enact major policy reforms more freely than coalition governments are able to do. Two examples of this type of situation are the Chrétien government's deficit reduction measures in the 1990s and the implementation by the BC Liberals of a carbon tax in 2008-09.

Goodyear-Grant (2017) alludes to another issue with representation under PR electoral rules. When voters go to the polls, they most often cast their vote for the party whose platform most closely aligns with their overall preferences. Under plurality electoral rules, the winning party is likely to receive a majority government and so has the mandate from voters to enact the policies outlined in their platform.¹¹ Thus, the translation of voters' preferences into policies is fairly clear. However, under PR electoral rules, because of the post-election bargaining that often has to occur to form a coalition following elections, a gap can emerge between the mandates that voters granted to the parties and the policies that result from the coalition government. As Goodyear-Grant explains:

... extensive alterations to a party's platform as a result of coalition bargaining after the electorate has cast its ballots can challenge the mandate model of representation, depending on how far the negotiated coalition agreement deviates from parties' election promises. Put simply, voters cast ballots for a set of campaign proposals, and coalition governments may pursue something that looks quite different. (2017: 58)

Within a democracy, accountability can be described as the ability of voters to punish or reward governments and candidates for what they view as either policy success or failures. How politicians and governments are held accountable under the existing electoral system in British Columbia is relatively straightforward. Because the province uses single-member districts, if voters are dissatisfied with the performance of their particular member of the legislative assembly (MLA), they can simply shift their vote to another candidate. The same logic applies to the government as a whole.

¹¹ Of course, parties may choose to disregard their platforms and mandates but they can then be held accountable by voters during the next election.

Since most elections using plurality rules result in a majority government, if voters are unhappy with the government, they can clearly identify who is at fault and vote for a different party.

Holding governments accountable becomes more difficult when the government is a coalition. Loewen (2017) argues that voters have limited knowledge about politics and policies and it can be difficult to clearly assign blame and credit. He cites experimental evidence that suggests that voters are best able to overcome these limitations and hold governments accountable when they only have to consider the actions of a single party or individual. At the same time, voters are given limited options during elections and can only use their vote to punish or reward governments for their policy decisions.

Goodyear-Grant (2017) similarly argues that having coalition governments “diminishes accountability” (p. 57). She contends that coalition governments tend to blur the responsibility for policy actions and that this can make it difficult for voters to clearly assign blame or credit. Along similar lines, Fisher and Hobolt (2010) find empirical evidence that suggests that retrospective voting (voting that is based on the evaluation of the government’s performance) is weaker when it involves a coalition. Specifically, Fisher and Hobolt (2010) found that only five percent of voters who thought that single party government did a very bad job voted for the incumbent party, whereas 16 percent of voters who thought a coalition government did a very bad job voted for the incumbent. This suggests that there is less retrospective voting based on government performance when the government in question is a coalition government. Fisher and Hobolt (2010) also found that retrospective voting declines when the number of parties in a coalition increases. This further suggests that voters have increased difficulty holding parties to account when the number of parties in a coalition increases.

Conclusion

All electoral systems involve trade-offs and each embodies different views about how democracy should function. Normatively speaking, electoral systems such as the one under which BC currently operates and which often produce single party majority governments, tend to emphasize stable and effective governance; PR electoral systems, the suggested alternative in BC, tend to emphasize a more proportionate allocation of seats based on votes. Whether one outcome is more desirable over another is debatable.

However, discussions about electoral reform, both in BC and elsewhere in Canada, tend to focus solely on the perceived need for a more proportionate electoral system. This singular emphasis ignores many of the other aspects of an electoral system that are equally critical; electoral systems ought to be evaluated on far more than one criterion.

This study considered a fuller range of criteria and investigated how a shift to PR in British Columbia might affect the composition of the legislature, the types of governments that would be formed, and how a change in the electoral system could affect the representation of voters and the accountability of politicians. The study found, first, that a shift to PR in BC would likely lead to a more fragmented legislature and a greater polarization of political parties. Second, it showed that coalition governments would likely become the norm, the effect of which could be to allow minor parties to exercise a disproportionate amount of power and increase policy uncertainty in the province. Third, the study found that a shift to PR could reduce the effective representation of voter preferences, while also making it more difficult for voters to hold governments and politicians accountable.

These findings suggest that, at the very least, debates surrounding electoral reform need to be expanded and that governments and citizens should consider a broader set of evaluative criteria when determining whether it is necessary to change BC's electoral system.

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