

Different voting methods have their good and bad points

Dr. Dennis Pilon, Philip Olsson and Dr. Barry Kay were taking part in Sunday's electoral reform panel discussion.

By Bill Rea

When it comes to deciding how to run federal elections in this country, it looks like there's no such thing as a perfect solution.

That was one of the points that came through Sunday at the electoral reform panel discussion, which was hosted by the Dufferin-Caledon Federal Liberal Riding Association.

Presentations were made in favour of proportional representation, the use of ranked or preferential ballots, and maintaining the status quo, also known as first past the post.

Dr. Dennis Pilon, associate professor of political science at York University, pointed out that under the current system, a candidate could win an election, even if that person gets considerably less than half the total votes. A candidate just has to have more than anyone else.

Proportional representation is easy too understand. He said if a party at election time gets 45 per cent of the total vote, that party gets roughly 45 per cent of the seats in the assembly. He added that while there are some variations, most western democracies use some form of proportional representation.

There are lists of candidates who would be eligible to be named to seats under a system like this. Pilon said there are variations, in which the list could be open or closed. If the list is open, voters have the ability to move candidates up or down the list.

One of the variations he mentioned is mixed-member proportional representation, in which some representatives are elected in ridings, and others are chosen from lists. He said such a system is used in New Zealand.

Pilon said one of the advantages of the current system is it helps create legislative majorities, with significant local representation. The disadvantages is the results may not reflect the will of the voters. Its also not clear how to measure accountability when a party can form a majority government with only 40 per cent of the vote.

The advantages of proportional representation are it's more accurate, creating real majorities in government, and more competitive. The disadvantages include fewer clear majorities, meaning there have to be coalitions to form governments. He added there are concerns such a system could result in instability, but that's not well supported by facts.

Pilon also addressed how a decision to change the system should be made. He said the Conservatives want a referendum, but there are arguments that would just reflect a matter of taste. He argued it should be more a matter of principle, or what is right.

Dr. Barry Kay, associate professor of political science at Wilfrid Laurier University, said he was an advocate of proportional representation until recently.

‘There's no perfect system,’ he maintained, adding the decision has to be based on what is better.

Kay pointed out that in the 23 federal elections in Canada since the Second World War, there have only been two occasions when one party got more than 50 per cent of the total vote. One was in 1958, and the other in 1984.

He agreed proportional representation offers a fair way to distribute representatives, but that's assuming the party system remains as it is now.

He cited examples of Italy and Israel, where there are about 10 parties competing for seats in the legislature. There are some parties that won't deal with certain other parties. Kay said that results in a bargaining exercise, in which smaller parties are able to carry more leverage than their vote totals should allow. He was worried Canada could move in a direction like that.

He was also concerned that proportional representation could lead to the creation of more parties.

Kay stated that if people are going to opt for change, they are not likely to chose proportional representation.

He also said that if ranked ballots (allowing people to vote for their first, second and third choice) are used, that will likely benefit the Liberals more. Many Conservatives would pick the Grits as their second choice, as would many New Democrats. He added there are some who would see ranked ballots as a Liberal power grab.

Some people vote strategically, meaning they vote for a party that's likely to get elected, rather than the one they would like to. Ranked ballots would make that unnecessary.

Kay also pointed out most MPs get elected with less than 50 per cent of the total vote, so ranked ballots can fix that.

Philip Olsson of KJ Harrison and Partners Inc., argued the current system is effective, flexible, accommodates growth and change, and is fair and understandable. He also said it's transparent, as pre-election deals between parties are rare.

‘So we have problems?’ he asked.

Olsson pointed out ranked ballots would result in more legitimate majorities, but he was concerned that they would result in moderation of party policies to make them more appealing to second-choice voters.

Proportional representation, he said, seems more fair for smaller parties, but he also said it's not self-evident that parties will go to Ottawa in proportion to the number of votes they get.

‘It's not matter of natural justice,’ he said.

He also said it might seem to be more transparent, especially in terms of cooperation between parties. But he argued it could result in more pre-packaged coalitions.

Olsson said there could be unforeseen consequences from both alternatives.

The foreseen consequences from ranked ballots, he said, would be confused voters. He also said it would increase the role of parties and the influence of polling, possibly producing results it's not supposed to.

Commenting on the consequences of proportional representation, Olsson said, ‘Goodbye majority government.’

He added it could lead to pre-packaged coalitions. He also said it would be harder for voters to turn out a government.

Another consequence is it would decrease regional representation.

One woman in the audience commented on the concentration of power in the Prime Minister's Office, commenting that ranked ballots would result in more majorities and few checks and balances.

Kay argued it wouldn't result in a great change, but it would be more legitimate.

One man argued a lot of people are not well-equipped to vote now. If a more complex system is brought in, will they learn how to use it? He also wondered if there are any plans for making voting mandatory, like it is in Australia.

Pilon pointed out there are some people who don't care. ‘That's a freedom in our system,’ he said.

He added that often comes from a feeling that they don't know enough, commenting that something can be done about that.

Pilon also said mandatory voting would be a great way to get people out to the polls, adding that would force parties to change the way they respond to the electorate.

He also didn't think forcing people to get out to vote would be any worse than forcing them to pay taxes.

‘We make people do stuff all the time,’ he said.

Kay argued that mandatory voting would result in less committed voters, making them more susceptible to the likes of a Donald Trump.

‘Is that the experience in Australia?’ one man called out.

‘The devil's in the details,’ Pilon replied.



Dr. Dennis Pilon, Philip Olsson and Dr. Barry Kay were taking part in Sunday's electoral reform panel discussion.