



Saskatchewan



Notes

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Democratic Reform: Taking a Chance on Change

By Joyce Green and Fraser Needham

The federal election of October 14, 2008 produced more of the same: another parliament with a plurality of MPs unrepresentative of the Canadian population or its political preferences. This outcome is yet another example of democracy frustrated by an inadequate electoral system, and a political process frustrated by partisanship.

Evidence for our claim is apparent in an analysis of the voting results. For example, Elections Canada data show that in Saskatchewan in the 2008 election, the Conservative Party got 13 of 14 seats, with 54 per cent of the vote. Fair Vote Canada (<http://www.fairvote.ca/>), a non-partisan organization working to change Canada's electoral system, writes that if there were a correspondence between votes cast and seats in the House of Commons, our federal government would look quite different:

	Popular Vote	Proportional Seats	Seats Under Current System
Conservative	38%	117 seats	143
Liberal	26%	81 seats	76
NDP	18%	57 seats	37
Bloc	10%	28 seats	50
Green	7%	23 seats	0

Most voters did not get what they voted for, and now lack political representation. The outcome does not reflect the popular vote. Fewer citizens bother to vote — only 59 per cent of Canadians made the effort in the last federal election. The health of our democracy is poor, and citizen cynicism is high.

Moreover, political parties, which provide virtually all of our candidates for political office, are doing a poor job of running candidates in winnable ridings who are anything but professional, middle-aged, white and male.

For example, Saskatchewan currently has only two women in Parliament out of 14 MPs. Only one Saskatchewan MP is Aboriginal — despite Aboriginal people comprising about 14 per cent of Saskatchewan's population now and likely to rise to 30 per cent within two decades.

In provincial politics, things are not much better. Female MLAs account for only 12 seats in the Saskatchewan Legislature, or 21 per cent. There are also only four Aboriginal MLAs.

Fair Vote Saskatchewan is part of Fair Vote Canada. President of Fair Vote Saskatchewan is Don Mitchell; Treasurer Larissa Shasko; other officers available from Larissa.shasko@gmail.com and also their website.

Federally, just 15 per cent of MPs are female, and under two per cent Aboriginal. In spite of these dismal numbers, political parties seem indifferent to the obvious lack of women and Aboriginal people in elected positions.

Does this matter for the health of our democracy? You bet it does.

First, a huge talent pool is going untapped. Second, in a representative democracy there should be at least some correlation between those who hold political (and economic) power and the general population. Third, the legitimacy of our system relies on the confidence of citizens in the electoral process, the governments it produces, and the policies of these governments, and Canadians are losing confidence in both.

Moreover, governments have never been good at meeting the needs of communities that are voiceless. Having more women of all ethnicities, and more Aboriginal people of both genders, will only improve democratic life and policy and deepen the collective intelligence of governments. This benefits us all.

For change to occur in political parties, leaders need to make a commitment to benchmarked goals. Strong female and Aboriginal candidates must be selected to run in winnable seats, and promoted to senior roles both within parties and government. Parties must provide extra financial support for both women and Aboriginal candidates who generally face greater financial challenges in running for office. Lastly, all parties must be more accommodating of their politicians, recognizing the importance of family life and allowing extra time for significant family events, pregnancies and attending to sick children. So where do political parties stand now? Most are silent on these questions. Very few have established benchmarks and strategies for achieving them.

At its 2008 Convention, the Saskatchewan NDP adopted a resolution pledging to work toward the goal of nominating 50 per cent female candidates for the 2011 provincial election. In the 2007 provincial election, the NDP committed to convening a Citizens' Assembly to review and make recommendations about a variety of democratic reform proposals including proportional representation. As of yet, the Saskatchewan Party government has made no similar commitments, but it should be encouraged to do so. Strengthening our democratic process is an issue on which there should be multi-party commitment.

Some commentators see no need to change. Think again.

In the last federal election, only 59 per cent of eligible citizens voted both nationally and in Saskatchewan. This degree of alienation and apathy amounts to democratic dysfunction. Too many feel that politicians are corrupt, that politics doesn't take account of citizens, and that only those with power and privilege can have an impact.

Just how dysfunctional is Canada's current electoral system? Designed for a two-party system over a century ago, it now defines the way elections are contested by at least five substantial political parties and several more minor parties. The current system over-rewards parties that have regional concentrations of support (like the Bloc and historically, the Reform), and punishes those that have broader support with thinner concentrations (like the NDP and the Greens). In virtually all ridings, there are large chunks of the electorate who vote for someone other than the winning candidate – and they get no real political representation. Voters who realize that their votes are not likely to produce the outcome of their choice often don't bother voting, or they vote for an "anybody but" ticket, instead of for a positive outcome. This contributes to voter cynicism and apathy.

Some commentators have warned against the instability and policy paralysis of minority governments. Their assumptions are unfounded, and their claims are fearmongering.

Minority governments can be good governments, but we need to develop the political culture to support them. We need a new electoral system that rewards parties with seats in approximate proportion to their share of the popular vote. And we need all parties to be less adversarial, and more collaborative. This might also improve the reputation of politics and politicians, at the same time that it re-involves citizens in democratic life.

Ideological distinctions and policy alternatives are normal, healthy hallmarks of democracy. However, too much recent political debate has been characterized not by ideological differences, but by poisonous arguments consisting of decibels and epithet. The increased use of attack ads was exemplified by the Conservatives' campaign against then-Liberal leader Stéphane Dion. These tactics brought public discourse to an all-time low, and degraded our political culture — apparently with at least some of the cost charged to the public purse. Together with the Prime Minister's dishonesty in challenging the legitimacy of the coalition proposal that would have removed his party from power (coalition governments are a constitutionally appropriate form, subject only to the ability of the government's ability to maintain the confidence of the House of Commons), these tactics bring the political class and politics themselves into disrepute with ordinary citizens.

Without electoral change, none of the current political parties are up to the challenge of re-engaging voters and increasing voter turnout. Even with electoral change, citizens will have to accept their responsibilities and involve themselves in the continuous practice of public democratic life. If we don't bother to get off the couch to vote; if we can't take the time to read newspapers or listen to quality newscasts to inform

ourselves, we really are not competent to exercise the franchise. Democracy is work — as Barack Obama put it in his inauguration, it is a responsibility for those who have “put away childish things”.

Changing the electoral system will not eliminate all problems, but it will go some distance to making politics real, relevant, and available to citizens. It will reduce partisanship, encourage compromise, and encourage parties to recruit candidates who reflect our population's diversity. With this in mind, Premier Wall should strike an Electoral Reform Commission as soon as possible; appoint a range of persons to it crossing partisan boundaries; and mandate it to hold hearings, make recommendations on electoral change and have these recommendations in place well in advance of the next provincial election.

Given most Canadians' political ennui and alienation, we certainly can do no worse than the status quo.

At a time when Americans are reinvigorated by democratic politics, voting in record numbers for a man who campaigned on change, Canadians are inexplicably mired in the politics of an antiquated electoral system designed for a less democratic era. Adopting a proportional representation electoral system, and pressing parties to establish benchmarks for inclusion of a broad range of Canadians, is the quickest way to deepen and strengthen our democracy.

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What is Fair Vote Canada?

Fair Vote Canada (FVC) is a national organization and campaign comprised of voters from all regions, all parties, all points of view and all walks of life. It is helping Canadians learn about the problems with our voting system and the availability of better alternatives, such as those based on proportional representation.

Currently, there are 22 Chapters (groups) across the country involved in raising awareness of the need for changing the way we elect our politicians. You can become a member of Fair Vote Canada online at <http://www.fairvote.ca/>.

One of the newest chapters of Fair Vote Canada is the Saskatchewan Chapter. The Fair Vote Canada-Saskatchewan Chapter was founded on January 18th, 2009. The interim Executive for 2009 is as follows:

President: Don Mitchell
Vice-President: Gord Hunter
Treasurer: Larissa Shasko
Secretary: Derron Hoover

Executive Members at Large: Sandra Finley, Ivan Olynyk, Elaine Hughes, and Rick Sawa.

The first AGM of the Fair Vote Canada-Saskatchewan Chapter will be held in fall of 2009. A new executive will be elected at that AGM. Watch for upcoming information on the exact date/location on our website at <http://fairvotesask.blogspot.com/>.

The aim of the Saskatchewan chapter is to raise awareness locally that the way we elect our politicians needs to be changed. People in Saskatchewan want to feel that their vote counts, and an electoral system of proportional representation is the answer. One of the first points of action for the Fair Vote Canada-Saskatchewan Chapter is to challenge the provincial government to revive the Calvert government's 2007 election commitment to form a citizens assembly to improve our voting system, which included plans for a provincial referendum on representative models and the voting age.

How to support Fair Vote Saskatchewan

The Fair Vote Canada-Saskatchewan Chapter is currently in the process of organizing an educational and social networking Fair Voting event in June. More information on this event will be going out at the end of May. Look for Fair Vote Canada materials at various summer festivals across Saskatchewan. Please visit our website often at <http://fairvotesask.blogspot.com/> for up to date information on these and other upcoming events, such as "Walk or Bike Around Wascana Lake for Fair Voting" — Date TBA.

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives – Saskatchewan (CCPA-SK), is an independent, non-partisan research organization dedicated to promoting economic and social research of importance to Canadian and Saskatchewan citizens. For more information contact CCPA at: Suite G, 2835 13th Avenue, Regina, SK S4T 1N6; (306) 924-3372 or ccpasask@sasktel.net