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In Defense of Majoritarianism

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Few people have bothered to defend the majoritarian, winner take all character of the Canadian electoral system, in which the party that wins the most seats in plurality-rule constituency elections is granted a franchise to govern by itself for a maximum term. This electoral system has been in existence in the same form since the founding of the modern state in 1867. In this paper, I offer a vigorous defense of our Majoritarian arrangements when the alternative is some form of Proportional Representation. While the individual arguments I employ are well known, the train of reasoning here is, to my knowledge, unusual in the current Canadian context.[1]

My support for majoritarianism does not mean that I reject any kind of electoral reform. *All* electoral systems are imperfect, reflecting trade-offs among important criteria made in the past. (Some of the compromises embedded in our current arrangements will become evident in the course of my discussion.) In view of that fact, it makes sense to think about changes that might improve our system of self-government. I do so towards the end of the paper, where I consider alternative rules for local elections as a way of showing that my argument, and the Majoritarian vision, is robust in this respect. But the choice of voting rule is not the most important issue we must address.

One defense of majoritarianism that *has* been offered at various times in Canada is that the existing winner take all system makes it difficult for proponents of extreme or odious ideas to win a seat in the legislature, because like-minded supporters must be geographically concentrated in reasonably large numbers. This *may* be so, but it too is not the central issue that we have to deal with.[2] Nor do I think that the form of the electoral system is central to the maintenance of civil liberty in Canada, which depends on the countervailence provided by our constitutional, legal, civil and administrative institutions.[3]

I outline what I think *is* the central issue in the choice between electoral systems in the next section. But before doing so, I want to pay tribute to Bob Young's work on the nature and instrumental consequences of Canadian political institutions, expressed in his papers and books over many years. Bob was writing about the issues addressed in this paper thirty years ago ("Do We Have the Political System to Get Us Where We Want To Go?", Young, 1991).

The main argument

The critical issue in the debate about electoral reform is how to deal with the leap of faith required in going from *representative* government, on the one hand, to *good* government, on the other. By good government, I mean a system of self-government that contributes substantially to our social and economic well-being. Whether we choose to err on the side of principles of responsibility if we stay with our existing Majoritarian system, or to err on the side of principles of representation if we adopt Proportional Representation in some form, we must make a well considered leap of faith in judging which system best promotes *'good'* government in this sense. This leap is analogous to the one that was an essential ingredient in the 1988 election fought between political parties and interest groups opposing and promoting freer trade with the United States.

How are these fundamentally different principles *supposed* to work in choosing a legislature? In the Proportional vision, an election is a means of obtaining a representative legislature that mirrors opinions in the country by assigning seats to parties in proportion to their share of the national vote. As Young (1991, 78) and others have pointed out, in a geographically diverse country like Canada this will also include more 'balanced' regional representation within the ranks of the governing party or coalition.[4]

The Majoritarian vision is radically different. An election is not a means of producing a representative legislature, though it may do so in an electoral equilibrium or outcome. It is in the first instance a means for voters to impose a government on a legislature, and to give that government the means to act decisively during the life of the legislature. Each government obtains and uses its franchise for a limited period, and then is re-evaluated to see if the franchise should be renewed or given to another party. This is what we mean by *responsible* government: a government able to act decisively and which can, as a result, be clearly held responsible for its actions.

How do these principles *actually work* when we look at the legislature? What is clear is the effect of either system on the equilibrium number of parties in Parliament and in the government, which is well short of what we want to know about how good government is best nurtured. The Majoritarian system we have now leads to a smaller number of parties, because voters have an incentive to desert candidates and parties that are most unlikely to win, while Proportionality will lead to a larger number. Moreover, Majoritarian governments almost always consists of a single party while government under PR is almost always a coalition of smaller parties that is produced *after* the general election, sometimes long after[5], since one party will rarely have a majority of seats, with the formation of such coalitions depending on negotiations among parties represented in the legislature.[6] It should also be noted that unlike PR where the formation of government is handed over to the parties, in a Majoritarian system voters are directly responsible for electing a government, which is part of its greater emphasis on accountability.

Because of the winner take all plurality rules at both constituency and national levels in our current system, votes for local candidates or parties that do not win a plurality are, as proponents of PR put it, 'wasted', seats and votes of national parties in Parliament are usually not strictly proportional, and the governing party usually has less than fifty percent of national votes, a situation often referred to by proponents of PR as the problem of 'false majorities'. It should be recognized, however, that 'wasted' and 'false' are pejorative terms that have clear meaning in the present context only if you *start* with a principle of representation in mind, and in the Majoritarian vision, as we shall see, disproportionality is a virtue.

In any case, the most difficult part of the assessment we must make is not about wasted votes, a concern about which I do not simply dismiss, and to which I will return. The most difficult matter to deal with is what happens *after* the legislature is chosen. Here we have to rely on arguments about how things evolve in the long run - that is, about what public policies are adopted and about how these government actions affect our lives over many years. If you think that is hard to deal with, you are right. If you think it doesn't matter, and we can make a choice between electoral systems without going into such deep waters, I beg to differ. Maintaining a system of self-government that actually improves the way we and our children live *is* the central problem.

Under PR, *good government* in this important sense is made subservient to balanced party representation in the legislature *in the hope* that in the long run, the two will be the same. In the Majoritarian vision, good government is made subservient to the election of a government that can

act decisively and accountably over its term, *with the hope* that in the long run the two will be the same.[7]

PR systems, by design, produce representation in the legislature in accordance with each party's percentage of votes. If a portrait of society in the legislature that reflects voting by party is what you want, regardless of how this portrait came about and regardless of how everything works out in the end, there is no better alternative. But a judgement on this basis alone would be short-sighted. In the first place, implementation of this vision is short-sighted because the nature of the parties and the distribution of their seats in the legislature depends on the electoral system. As Duverger (1984, 34) points out in his assessment of majoritarian methods as opposed to proportional representation: "The basic argument of the PR advocates is that it gives a photographic image of public opinion that is as faithful a likeness as possible. That is true if we compare the vote percentages received by the different parties and their seat percentages. But the distribution of the votes is itself dependent on the country's party system, which in turn depends on the type of electoral system. PR projects as much as it records. "[8]

Encouraging good government

We can go further. Consider this: In any democratic system, it is essential that parties face the prospect of losing office, that they do lose from time to time, and that they also face the prospect of returning to office. The prospect of alternation in office induces parties who want to continue to govern to cater to all sorts of voters by never moving too far towards their own party's most preferred choices at the expense of various other, minority interests. This is because electoral opposition mounts, the ability to govern erodes, and the probability of defeat at the polls in the next election all rise when minority interests are substantially ignored in favor of the interests of core supporters of the party in power. Moreover, and for essentially the same reason, since risk averse voters do not like to be jerked around - from left to right, and then vice versa - when partisan control changes, we see substantial continuity in major policies across adjacent governments.[9]

One may ask about this reasoning when the insights of behavioral economics and psychology are considered. Experimental evidence indicates that people prefer riskier choices when threatened with losses than when expecting gains, in contrast to standard expected utility theory in which such choices are (more) symmetrical with respect to gains and losses. (Quattrone and Tversky, 1988). As Quattrone and Tversky point out, voters' preference for the incumbent

when times are good and for the challenger when times are bad fits with this behavioral evidence. In that case, and if in fact that is the case, politicians who in a competitive environment are likely to be classically rational expected utility maximizers - as Wallerstein (2004) suggests they are likely to be, unlike voters who may be predictable but not entirely rational in this sense - will try even harder (than might be expected on the basis of standard expected utility theory) to avoid policies that impose losses on minorities, because these voters are likely to react even more vigorously to policy they think will harm them than standard theory predicts. Behind such a prediction is, again, the threat of losing office.

In other words, the prospect of alternation in office forces majorities to consider the interests of minorities who vote, or might vote, even if they are not well organized, and thus leads them to avoid engineering policies that expropriate parts of the electorate or that involve radical departures from established policies. This is so provided that the parties also see some prospect of returning to office if they are defeated.[10] (Otherwise they have nothing to lose by pursuing their self-interest once elected.)

Herein lies an important reason for the Majoritarian, winner take all system to have a stronger claim to our attention. Because of the winner take all, plurality rule voting at the local level, a small change in popular vote for a party can have large and even devastating consequences for the total number of seats in parliament the party wins, depending on how its total vote is distributed across electoral districts. Remember the Conservative incumbent government that dropped from 169 to 2 seats for a seat share of 0.6% in the 1993 election, while their popular vote dropped from 43% but only to 16%? In contrast, in a PR system, a small change in a party's total vote share leads only to a small change in seat shares, sometimes allowing losing parties to remain in a governing coalition.

Thus, the disproportionality in national votes and seats by party that proponents of PR often point to as a serious defect of the existing system is, from the Majoritarian point of view, an essential strength, helping to create and maintain the threat of turnover that is a source of reasonably efficient and harmonious public policy. In this light, the Loosemore/Hanby (1971) and Gallagher (1991) indexes of proportionality for post-war elections in Canada, provided for the 1940-2015 period in the Appendix, are telling. They show that disproportionality in Parliament peaked when Diefenbaker threw out the Liberals with a huge majority in 1958 after more than 25 years of Liberal government, when the Mulroney Conservatives again soundly defeated the

Liberals in 1984 after 20 more years of Liberal governments, when the Liberals under Chretien destroyed the Conservative party for a decade in 1993, and when Harper won a clear majority of seats in 2011.[11]

Protection against bad government

There is a second, related, advantage of the Majoritarian vision that addresses the core problem of insuring that representative government leads to good government. While Majoritarianism by its nature creates conditions conducive to turnover *if* the government falls out of favor, neither it nor the Proportional vision contains any absolute guarantee as to the goodness of the government that emerges over the longer run. How could they? The philosopher Karl Popper took up the question of what sort of system we ought to adopt in the absence of such a guarantee, and in view of the additional, and perhaps even more fundamental problem of agreeing on what 'good' government means. He concluded that the best political system is one that is better at avoiding situations in which a bad government does too much harm. From this point of view, we could say that the best electoral system is the one that allows a 'bad' government to be replaced most easily.[12]

Which of the electoral systems under consideration is better in this sense? Without doubt, it is the Majoritarian one. Obviously, we will not always, or even usually agree on what bad means in this context. But in choosing between systems, we can agree to build in a bias against renewing the franchise of a government about which a sizeable group of citizens is substantially displeased, rather than adopt a system that is more robust to such opposition.

Reform in a Majoritarian system: fair voting and defense against Condorcet losers

So far, I have explained why PR, which ranks higher on representativeness, crucially lacks accountability and robust defense against bad government when compared to our Majoritarian system.[13] No electoral system is perfect, however, and it is instructive in the present context to consider a reform of the rule for election of individual members of parliament that addresses the issue of wasted votes. This was a charge against the current system I did not dismiss out of hand, despite its pejorative origin. The challenge is to improve the voting rule while retaining the benefits of Majoritarianism that I have identified.

To think about this matter, it is useful to begin by considering two related characteristics that we would like any method of electing members of parliament to possess: (i) fairness, as I

define it in what follows, and (ii) insurance against the election of Condorcet losers - candidates who win a plurality under existing rules, but who would lose to at least one other candidate in a pairwise sequence of simple majority rule votes.[14]

The unfairness of simple plurality rule voting stems from the fact that a person who casts their single vote in support of some candidate is in a better position than a citizen who wants to vote against that candidate. One vote to oppose a candidate allows only one alternative to be supported, while anyone but that candidate may be preferred. This is a well-known problem, one that may be at least partially dealt with by the adoption of some form of instant run-off voting (IRV), also referred to as ranked choice voting. IRV systems, like the Alternative Vote used in elections for Australia's lower House and (as of 2018) a system that is used in the state of Maine, allows voters to better express their preferences against, as well as for each candidate by permitting them to rank candidates. These numerical rankings are then aggregated in easy to understand ways to determine the single winner. (A brief description of the Alternative Vote and another IRV method - the Borda Count - referred to below is provided in the footnotes).[15,16]

While caution is warranted in making such a change, for the reason I will point to later, the use of an IRV system for local elections, which places proponents and opponents of any candidate or party on a more equal footing, would attenuate the feeling some voters have when their preferred party is seldom if ever elected. Now their opposition to the usual winner would have more force, their preferences over alternatives will be more fully taken into account, and sometimes a candidate they rank second may be elected.[17]

The other characteristic of a voting mechanism I identified concerns the insurance it offers against the election of Condorcet losers. Electoral competition in a plurality rule election does not always eliminate undesirable or even extreme candidates when compared to PR. Centrist candidates may split the vote, or it may be advantageous for voters to support a 'bad' candidate or party that others also support, who still would offer some value to the voter, then to vote for a 'better' party who few are likely to support (Myerson 1993). If the winning candidate in such a situation was to stand against each of the other contestants in a pairwise majority rule vote, however, that person would likely lose one of these votes. In other words, he or she is unlikely to be a Condorcet winner.

Fortunately, there are reforms of the voting rule that may be compatible with the Majoritarian vision, and which offer better protection against Condorcet losers while at the same

time being fairer. Eric Maskin, in his testimony before the *Special Committee on Electoral Reform* (2016) argued for an electoral system called Majority Rule, in which voters rank all candidates so that each candidate's aggregate ranking may be tested against each other candidate's ranking, pair by pair (how many voters prefer this candidate to that one?), with the Condorcet winner (who beats every other candidate in the simulated pairwise matchups) being selected, if one exists. Such a procedure is complicated compared to others, but it is feasible with the use of modern computing. The problem is that there may not be a Condorcet winner, only a vote cycle over the alternatives.[18]

It is difficult to know how often a vote cycle will arise, and what to do if it does. IRV methods like the Alternative Vote or the Borda count are somewhat easier to understand and to implement, although they cannot offer as much protection against Condorcet losers. Majority Rule aside, the investigation conducted by Gehrlein and Lepelley (2011) suggests that the Borda Count is likely to provide the best overall defense.

A reason for caution in adopting an IRV procedure is that it is not known, or even studied, so far as I know, how the Alternative Vote or the Borda Count would affect the sensitivity of support for the governing party in the face of swings in its popular support. This sensitivity is an essential, socially productive characteristic of the existing system. Before proceeding, it is important that the effect of alternative IRV voting mechanisms on the sensitivity of electoral support for the governing party be investigated, so that we can see what we must give up in this respect when adopting an IRV voting mechanism.

Conclusion: What should we do?

Canada has had the same winner-take -all parliamentary electoral system since 1867, and the country has developed into one of the better places to live. This is not only because we are endowed with natural resources; there are several countries with rich resource endowments that are much worse. The good quality of Canadian institutions has undoubtedly also played an important role.

Recently some people have argued that we would be better off if one of the key institutions in Canada - our electoral system - was radically altered. To be fair to those who want some form of Proportional Representation, it should be noted that the fact that Canada is a relatively prosperous part of the world does not tell us what the counterfactual under PR would have been

like, though I also think that the economic history of the country is not irrelevant when important, hard to reverse decisions are involved.

In a recent study of electoral history, Blais, Gunterman and Bodet (2017) use internationally comparable surveys of citizen opinion to conclude that governing parties are better liked than non-governing parties in countries with Majoritarian systems (Australia, Canada, France, and Great Britain) than in countries with some form of PR. While this evidence does not bear directly on the extent to which representative government of one kind or another leads to *good* government, it is consistent with the understanding I have provided of how Majoritarianism works, and it too is not irrelevant.[19]

How should we finally decide? I return, then, to the main issue, which is conceptual as much as empirical. Choosing between Proportional and Majoritarian visions requires us either to err on the side of principles of representation, or to err on the side of principles of responsibility. Both choices necessarily involve a leap of faith - an informed guess - as to which system best promotes good government. PR produces a representative legislature by design, but that does not guarantee good government. Majoritarianism is a sensible a way of encouraging good government and is also a sensible way of protecting ourselves against bad ones. It is likely robust enough to encompass a carefully chosen reform of the voting rule for local elections to improve fairness among voters, and to provide additional defense against bad government. In my view, there is no decisive reason to replace our Majoritarian system of self-government, one that we have lived with for 150 years and which is, for good reasons, likely to serve us reasonably well in the future.

Appendix

Votes, seats and proportionality in the post-WWII Canadian electoral system

The standard Gallagher (1991) index of proportionality of votes and seats is the following, where V_i refers to the national vote share of party i, while S_i refers to its seat share in Parliament:

$$\sqrt{\frac{1}{2} \ \Sigma_i (V_i - S_i)^2} \ \ .$$

This index was discussed in Parliament during recent debates concerning electoral reform. (The Minister for Electoral Reform was photographed holding up a poster with this formula on it.)
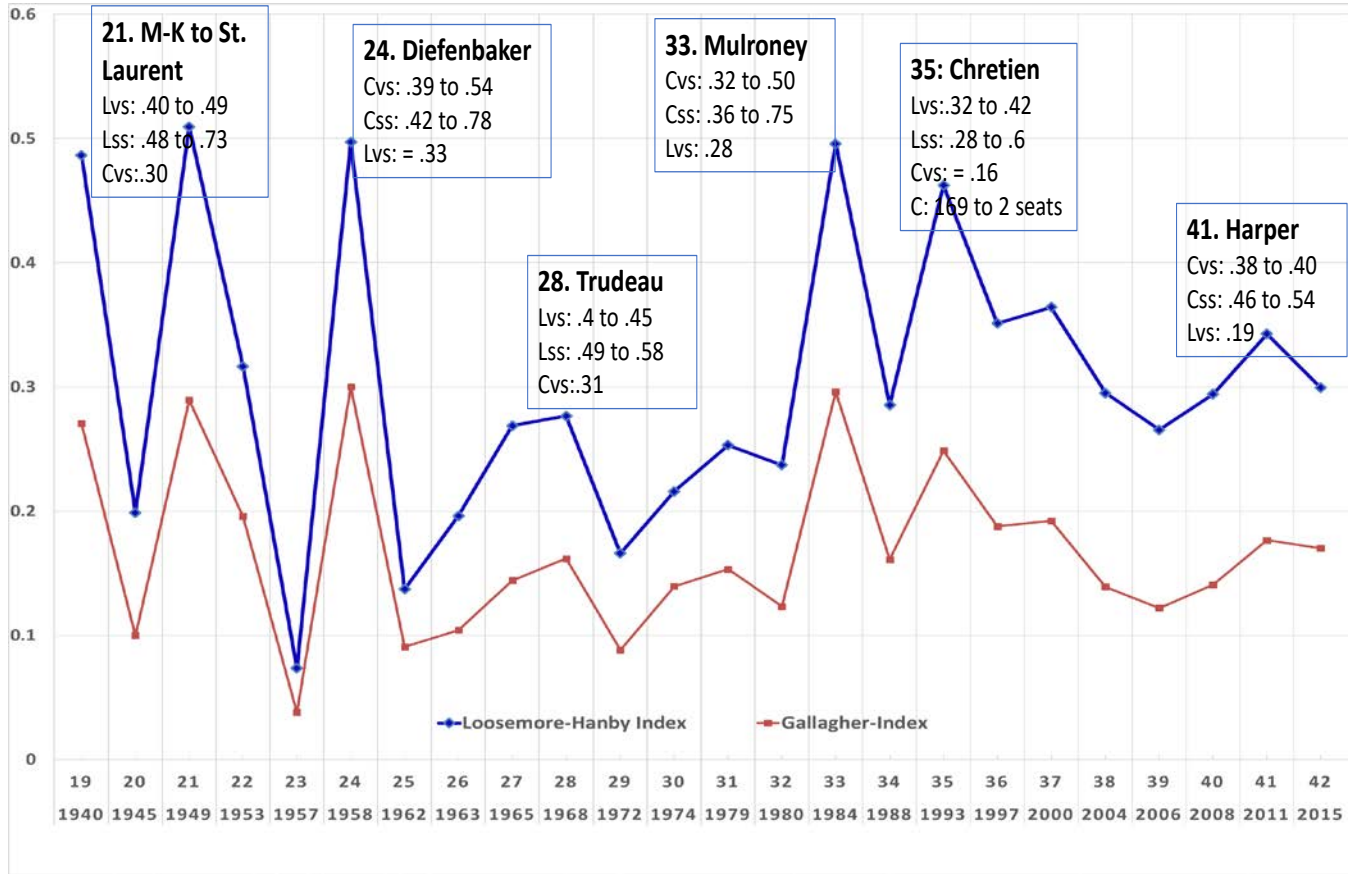
The earlier Loosemore-Hanby (1971) index of proportionality, which has a simpler form, but leads to a similar pattern of results for Canada is:

$$\frac{1}{2} \ \Sigma_i | V_i - S_i | \ .$$

Taagepera and Grofman (2003) compare these and other indexes of proportionality from an axiomatic point of view and conclude that Gallagher and Loosemore-Hanby indexes are both useful and methodologically better than others that have been proposed.

In the following diagram, based on work by undergraduate research student Meghan Byars (2016), the two indexes are graphed for the 19th to the 42nd general election - all post WWII elections in Canada. The correspondence of substantial government turnovers to peaks in the indexes, referred to in the text, is clearly apparent. The calculations are based on the votes and seats received by the major parties in Canada, where a 'party' must have won at least 1 seat in at least 2 elections. (Reform and the Conservative Alliance are considered to be one party in these calculations). In the figure a '*C*' refers to the Conservative party, and a '*L*' refers to the Liberal party. A subscript '*vs*' refers to a vote share, and a subscript '*ss*' refers to a seat share. The changes in shares referred to in the boxes are from the election prior to the one whose number is cited in the boxes.

Loosemore-Hanby and Gallagher Indexes of Proportionality

21. M-K to St. Laurent
Lvs: .40 to .49
Lss: .48 to .73
Cvs:.30

24. Diefenbaker
Cvs: .39 to .54
Css: .42 to .78
Lvs: = .33

33. Mulroney
Cvs: .32 to .50
Css: .36 to .75
Lvs: .28

35: Chretien
Lvs:.32 to .42
Lss: .28 to .6
Cvs: = .16
C: 169 to 2 seats

28. Trudeau
Lvs: .4 to .45
Lss: .49 to .58
Cvs:.31

41. Harper
Cvs: .38 to .40
Css: .46 to .54
Lvs: .19

Loosemore-Hanby Index   Gallagher-Index

19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42
1940	1945	1949	1953	1957	1958	1962	1963	1965	1968	1972	1974	1979	1980	1984	1988	1993	1997	2000	2004	2006	2008	2011	2015

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[1] Some background to the debate is provided by recent books on electoral reform in Canada, including Seidle and Docherty eds. (2003), Howe, Johnstone and Blais eds. (2005), and Blais ed. (2008). See also Parliament of Canada (2016), and Ferris, Winer and Grofman (2016).

[2] I say, '*may* be so', because circumstances could arise in which centrist candidates split the vote allowing a more extreme candidate to win (the case of Trump in the U.S. presidential primaries?), and other pathologies are possible. I return to this sort of problem later on when considering reform of the voting rule.

[3] One of the big questions in the contemporary world is what makes it harder for a strong government to arise that then sets about destroying existing democratic institutions. If voters are risk averse in choosing between alternative political institutions, they would surely take that problem into account. However, I know of no evidence that the choice between Majoritarianism and PR alters risk in this respect.

[4] As Young puts it (78): "No longer would hundreds of thousands of western Liberal votes, for instance, elect only one or two MPs." In fact, in the recent 2019 election the Liberal party, which formed a minority government, failed to elect a single member in Saskatchewan or Alberta. The reason that this happened is likely because of the negative consequences of the previous majority Liberal government's policies with respect to the non-renewable energy sector in the western economies. One should also note that it seems reasonable to think that the Liberal party paid a higher political price for its treatment of the energy sector in 2019 than it would have if Canada had a PR system. I return to the issue of accountability at various points later. (How would Bob Young have responded here and to my argument as a whole? Despite our many conversations over the years, I regret that Bob and I never discussed the merits of alternative electoral systems.)

[5] For example, in Israel the negotiations the followed the election of April 2019 failed, and it took two more elections to finally produce a government in May of 2020. This is a somewhat unusual example. But lengthy government formation processes where only one election was held are not uncommon.

[6] In the negotiations after an election takes place, a small party with odd or extreme views may play a role, upsetting the representativeness of the outcome. In this respect, it is important to note that most governments in PR systems are coalitions. Blais, Guntermann and Bodet (2017) report that in their study covering a large number of countries using some form of PR over a period from the late 1990s to 2011 and a smaller set using non-proportional systems, about 82 percent of governments under PR were coalitions while in the non-PR countries, none of the cabinets formed were coalitions.

[7] This approach to the central problem of governance identified here is inspired by Scott Gordon (1961). See also Gordon (1999). Gerring and Thacker (2008) acknowledge the importance of this problem. But they do not arrive at the same conclusion as I do because they try to combine both electoral traditions, seeking representativeness or inclusion and responsibility. They advocate a unitary state with closed list PR in a parliamentary setting which they refer to as centripetal government. I leave judgement of their argument to the reader, noting here only that elimination of federalism in Canada is not a viable option.

[8] It can be added that *if* Canadian society was badly divided into factions or ethnicities to the point of civil unrest, as unfortunately is the case in some parts of the world, the principle of representation, and thus PR takes on added value, as a way of containing civil unrest by giving the various factions formal representation in the legislature. In my view, Canadian society is not even close to such a state of affairs. On the role of PR in highly divided societies, see Reilly (2001).

[9] In a formal model of electoral politics, lying behind such behavior is the concavity of functions describing voting behavior, at least in the neighborhood of an electoral equilibrium.

[10] See also Przeworski (2010: 144-145).

[11] Note that I do not claim that Majoritarianism leads to more observed turnover of governments than does PR. The claim is that the identity or composition of the government is more sensitive to a given change in popular support, *should such a change in support occur.* If the Majoritarian vision works well, turnover may actually decline relative to that in PR systems.

[12] See Popper (1988). The only paper I have found that explicitly considers Popper's concern in the Canadian context is Derriennic (2005), though he does not agree with the idea of engineering a bias against the incumbent. In Derriennic (2016), he advocates a mild form of PR coupled with one of the voting mechanisms discussed in the next section.

[13] For some interesting recent empirical evidence concerning the trade-off between representation and accountability in the choice of an electoral system, see Becher and Gonzalez (2019).

[14] Condorcet (1743-1794) was an important mathematician and social choice theorist who discovered that majority rule does not generally provide a transitive ranking of alternatives. Party A may be preferred under simple majority rule to B, and B to C. But A may not beat C. It can happen that C may beat A in a simple majority rule vote, leading to cycling over the alternatives if we persist in trying to find a *Condorcet winner* - one candidate or party that beats every other in a pairwise sequence of simple majority rule votes. Arrow (1951) generalizes this result to a wide class of social choice mechanisms.

[15] In an Alternative Vote system, electors rank candidates numerically in order of preference, or may simply vote for one candidate. If no candidate receives a majority of the first-place votes, the last place candidate's votes are redistributed to his or her voters' next choices until someone achieves 50 percent of the total. In a Borda count, voters rank candidates numerically from best to worse. Each candidate's total vote based on every ranking across all voters is tabulated, with the candidate with the largest total declared the winner. A useful online introduction to voting rules is IDEA (2005). See also Parliament of Canada (2016). Among the important alternatives I do not consider here is Approval Voting (see Brams 2008), a non-ranking system in which a voter simply puts a mark beside each candidate of whom they approve, with the candidate that receives the most approvals declared the winner.

[16] In the election campaign of 2015, the Liberals proposed to adopt the Alternative Vote, perhaps because it was thought that the enhanced role it gives to second choice rankings in close contests would favor it in many constituencies. It is difficult to know if such a judgement is correct, because people condition the way they vote on the voting mechanism in place, as the earlier quote from Duverger (1984) illustrates. Past elections thus provide only a partial view of what might happen in the future.

[17] One may note that the AV method contains a bias against centrist candidates who everyone may prefer as a second choice, but who is eliminated in the first round because he or she is the first choice of only a minority of the electorate. Is this enough of a problem to rule it out?

[18] See again footnote 11.

[19] Indeed, this result may be more important that the authors acknowledge, for "The only way we can single out particular decisions as 'rational' in a society with heterogeneous preferences is that they minimize the popular dissatisfaction with the outcome." Przeworski (2010, 90).