

Book Review

Dennis Pilon

The Politics of Voting: Reforming Canada's Electoral System

Toronto: Emond Montgomery, 2007

Reviewed by Osvaldo Croci

Electoral systems are mechanisms to turn votes into parliamentary seats. Different electoral systems have different consequences or, to put it another way, maximize different values. Thus, plurality systems are more likely to yield majority governments and thus maximize the value of stability. Proportional systems, instead, usually lead to a fragmented party system but maximize the value of political representation. Most political scientists agree that there is no ideal electoral system. Its choice is simply a matter of which values one wishes to maximize. Dennis Pilon disagrees. He argues that plurality systems are not easily reconcilable with democratic values or, as he puts it: “Those who would highlight stability and majority governments as the key values in designing electoral systems at the expense of representing our political differences favour values that limit democracy and political contestation” (p. 9).

There is little doubt that by adopting a proportional system Canada would not only maximize different values ... but would also trade the negative consequences of the plurality system which are well-known in Canada with those of the proportional one which are not.

This is a strong statement which Pilon fails to anchor on solid political philosophical grounds, limiting himself to assert, in my opinion unconvincingly, that “terms like ‘majority governments’ should mean ... that the government actually represents a majority of the people” (p. 2). This book, however, cannot be dismissed as a *plaidoyer* for proportionality even if Pilon is one of the founders of Fair Vote Canada, an advocacy group that works towards the adoption of some form of proportional electoral system for all levels of government in Canada. The author’s stated preferences or values do not make it a simple political tract. Although not without some flaws, it is a learned and scientifically rigorous work that can be profitably read both by political scientists and the general public.

After discussing the characteristics of the major types of voting systems, Pilon offers an in-depth and accurate analysis of the way in which plurality systems work, focusing in particular on their shortcomings. While I completely share Pilon’s critique of plurality systems (Croci, 2011), I find it difficult to agree with his analysis of proportional systems. Pilon, in fact, concentrates on how proportional systems maximize his preferred values but hurriedly dismisses their shortcomings. To minimize the tendency of proportional systems to yield short-lived governments, for instance, Pilon argues that Italy’s fifty-one different governments between 1946 and 1994 were really

“more akin to cabinet shuffles in the Canadian system” (p. 53), brushing over the fact that most of these re-shuffles were the result of changes in the coalition of parties supporting the government in

Parliament or to intra-party factional squabbles, two of the usual consequences associated with proportional electoral systems.

The book then turns to examine the politics of electoral-system reform, a topic that has rarely been explored in the literature on electoral systems. Pilon shows, mostly but not exclusively with Canadian examples, how reforms are not brought about by debating which values a system should maximize but occur when political parties perceive that they can gain from reform. Unfortunately, Pilon limits himself to a succinct summary of his previous research on this topic and the reader is left longing for a more detailed historical reconstruction of those successful cases of electoral reform he mentions.

The final two chapters of the book are devoted to more tactical issues, e.g. whether reform in Canada should be pursued through a referendum, Parliament, or the courts and whether it should be sought only for federal elections or also at the provincial and municipal level.

One thing Pilon does not do is to reflect on what the possible consequences of the adoption of a proportional system in Canada might be. He justifies his choice, unconvincingly in my mind, by saying that “speculating in a vacuum about what might or could happen in Canadian politics under different voting rules is a worthless exercise, as it gives us no real insights into what the impact of different institutional arrangements might realistically be” (p. 10).

Perhaps, but there is little doubt that by adopting a proportional system Canada would not only maximize different values (and become more democratic according to Pilon), but would also trade the negative consequences of the plurality system which are well-known in Canada with those of the proportional one which are not and which Pilon chooses not to speculate on (for what concerns Canada) or to minimize (for what concerns other countries). In Italy, for instance, in 1953 a reform of the electoral system which would have assigned a ‘bonus’ (65 percent of the seats) to a party or a coalition of parties winning 50 percent of the popular vote plus one was widely perceived as an attack on democracy and dubbed the ‘swindle law’. Sixty years later, the proportional system having been identified, rightly or wrongly, as one of the sources of Italy’s political problems, the country has adopted an electoral reform (the third since the early 1990s) known as the Italicum which provides for a bonus of 15 percent of the seats to the party or coalition of parties that has received at least 37 percent of the popular vote. This time no one has argued that the premium undermines Italy’s democracy. Values, it would seem, change depending on experiences.

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Reference

Croci, O. 2011. When the Grass Is Not Greener on the Other Side or What Italians Need To Know about Canada’s Electoral System. Pp. 91-108 in Howard A. Doughty and Marino Tuzi (Eds.), *Culture and Difference: Essays on Canadian Society*. 2007. Toronto, Canada: Guernica Editions.