

Stuart Parker's Blog

Short essays on this and that

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Thoughts on the Fair Vote Canada Internal Referendum

I'm very annoyed to have to post to my blog right now. I am in the midst of paid writing work but recent developments in an organization I have supported for more than a decade and pertaining to a cause I have supported for twenty years require that I take this break. From 2005-07, I served as a member of Fair Vote Canada's national board; I currently sit on the board of its Vancouver chapter.

Since 2009, a group of activists in Toronto has been campaigning to introduce a voting system called "Alternative Vote" or "Instant Runoff Voting," to the city of Toronto. They tend to be defenders of many elements of the city's status quo, its underground, secret party system, its hyper-parochial single-member wards and various other elements of Toronto politics that did anything but impress me during my time there. Adding IRV/AV to Toronto's corrupt and failing system, they seem to think, will save it. Maybe they are right.

But for me, saving bad, failing undemocratic systems with minor tweaks has never been what Canada's voting reform movement is all about. Our political systems need deep, structural change in order to become fair, changes like proportional representation, the *raison d'être* of FVC.

I am largely indifferent to the group's project of moving the deckchairs on the Titanic that is Toronto's civic government; what is upsetting me is that this group has waged a relentless three-year campaign to bully Fair Vote Canada into backing them, or rather, to silence Fair Vote when activists and news organizations ask if the system they are backing is fair.

I think this is wrong. If people like AV/IRV and want to campaign for it, they should do so. But I see no constructive purpose in them expending both their own resources and those of Fair Vote Canada to take over the only national organization for proportional representation in our country and impose support for AV/IRV on this group. This group's campaign has culminated in an internal referendum in FVC over whether we should continue to support proportional representation at the local level. I am not pleased that our movement has reached this polarizing point, having to re-fight our most fundamental tenet, that of proportional representation. And I lament the needlessly wasted hours this campaign has already sucked out of our movement.

In the interests of full disclosure, I have to say that some of this message is motivated by my direct personal experience of that campaign in 2009 and 2010 when I co-chaired the Toronto Democracy Initiative, a campaign for municipal proportional representation. I have not found them to be honest or transparent in their communications about voting systems with the general public or with other members of the voting reform movement, sometimes employing the very discourse we are used to hearing from our adversaries.

You can see this in the kind of dishonest framing they have given the debate in the brochure they are circulating, which I rehearse below.

They claim: "Without parties, municipal PR would require much larger wards."

- Municipal political parties are legal in nearly every province. The prohibition on political parties is an unfair restriction that undermines the transparency and fairness of the electoral process. Yet strangely, **Option B supporters are not campaigning to end this unfair prohibition, even though it is contained in exactly the same pieces of legislation as the prohibition on ranked ballots.** Why, other than making it easier for them to sell an undemocratic voting system, would they claim that the prohibition on parties was written in stone while the prohibition on ranked ballots was easy to change, given that the same law would need to be amended by the same politicians to do either?

- Creating multi-member wards would only entail creating “much larger wards” if municipalities lacked the power to change the size of their city councils and add additional councilors. While introducing ranked ballots in Toronto requires changing provincial legislation, Toronto City Council can change the number of councilors in the city by a simple majority vote. Again, **Option B supporters are claiming that the number of councilors is cast in stone while the ability of voters to cast ranked ballots is easy to change. Actually, the reverse is true.**

- Most troublingly, we see Option B supporters pushing a standard talking point of the “no” forces in the PEI, BC and Ontario referenda, that effective representation is dependent on the number of ridings per 100,000 people and not, as PR advocates understand it, the number of elected representatives per 100,000 people. **Why would supposed advocates of proportional representation be using an anti-PR argument as one of their main talking points?**

They claim: “Ontario’s municipal voting law bans parties and, without them, proportionality is difficult to achieve.”

- **This seems like a very strange case to make for a campaign to amend another article the very same Ontario municipal voting law, doesn’t it?**

They claim: “Moving to a system of Instant Runoff Voting in some municipalities makes sense. It will help raise the profile for the need for electoral reform [proportional representation] at all levels.”

- Moving to IRV municipally would certainly increase the legitimacy of electoral reform provincially and federally. But the reform it would legitimize is IRV not proportional representation. Indeed, hearing progressives touting how great IRV is as a reform undercuts support for proportional representation, given that PR is based on different principles, values and assumptions. **It’s kind of like saying, “switching from canola oil to lard in my kitchen will encourage people to switch to a healthier oil, like olive oil in their kitchens.”**

- When a movement has suffered a series of defeats, there is a tendency to grasp at anything that looks like a victory. The idea that “electoral reform” is a good thing is a very dangerous idea. The assumption is that our current voting system is the worst possible voting system and that any “reform” will improve it. Vancouver voters made that mistake in the 1930s and saddled ourselves with an even worse voting system than first-past-the-post that has poisoned our city’s politics for nearly a century. If we turn into an organization backing “reform” in whatever form it comes, we expose ourselves to political manipulations that could make our system even worse. **IRV is just such a system, one of a tiny handful that mathematicians and political scientists have found is even less proportional than FPTP.**

They claim: “I think any system is better than the first-past-the-post system we have today.”

- **In the Australian parliament, where IRV is in effect, there is a two-party system thanks to the way that IRV transfers votes** from third parties like the Greens to the two main parties. Despite vibrant third party movements like the Greens, Democrats and others winning election to the country’s semi-proportional senate, Australia’s IRV lower house has only one member elected as a member of a party other than Liberal-National or Labour. Even though the Greens got 12% of the popular vote (triple the share won by the Canadian Greens in 2011), they ended up with only one seat thanks to IRV.

- Of course, IRV isn’t even the worst system. The voting system in effect in most of British Columbia’s cities arose out of the same kind of “any system is better than this one,” reform campaign in the 1930s. **Because people assumed FPTP was as bad as it gets, Vancouverites are saddled with the multi-member plurality voting system, allowing such unfairness as one parties to win all 27 seats contested in the 1996 election with just 43% of the vote.**

They claim: “FairVote USA, which has successfully advocated for vote reform in the U.S., embraces a diversity of voting systems including Instant Runoff Voting.”

- If FairVote USA had a track record of successfully moving America towards proportional representation, their model might bear greater study and emulation. Yet, the US is one of the few countries, further from PR than Canada, with its notoriously unfair electoral practices that appall the rest of the developed world. **This argument might work if FairVote USA could show any greater progress towards PR at any political level than Fair Vote Canada can.** Instead, the US doesn’t have a half-victory like the 2005 BC referendum in which 57% of British Columbians, comprising a majority of voters in 97% of the province’s ridings voted for single transferrable vote, the very system Option B

supporters attack as impossible to sell.

They claim: “I joined Fair Vote because I admired their commitment to improving our democracy. I believe we deserve more than a one-size-fits-all solution. Fair Vote would be well served not to ignore the value of ranked ballots at the municipal level.”

- Fair Vote Canada has always actively supported ranked ballots at the municipal level and has campaigned for ranked ballots at the provincial level in two referenda. What Fair Vote Canada has traditionally opposed is voting systems that are not proportional. **Since our inception as an organization, Fair Vote members in Toronto and other municipalities have been campaigning for progressive voting reforms that use ranked ballots** like single transferrable vote. The Option B committee is doing a great disservice by misrepresenting FVC’s position on the use of ranked ballots as the exact opposite of what it is.

- Similarly, **Fair Vote Canada has never taken the position that all municipalities or all provinces should use the same voting system.** Everywhere that FVC has worked for reform, it has offered solutions specific to local needs.

They claim: “I also believe that a win for IRV in Toronto would put voting reform on the map and help us move towards proportional representation for our provinces and our country”

- While I do not doubt the beliefs of AV/IRV advocates that this is what will happen, the problem is that they cannot show any evidence of this having happened anywhere else in the world. **Many places have adopted majoritarian voting systems, IRV and otherwise, and the evidence shows that making this move makes a jurisdiction less, not more likely to later institute PR.** IRV is a cul-de-sac when it comes to fair voting; in place after place, it has made it harder, not easier to get PR.

If you are eligible to vote in Fair Vote Canada’s internal referendum, please oppose any changes to our organization’s constitution. If AV/IRV is to be adopted by FVC, it should be on the basis of fair and honest debate, not the kinds of tricks I see when I look at the campaign materials we are getting right now. IRV/AV advocates have a large, well-funded organization independent of FVC; they should use *it* when they want to campaign for non-proportional voting systems and leave Fair Vote to talk about PR.

And if you are interested in real, substantial reforms to achieve fair voting at the municipal level in Ontario, I urge you to look at this [report](#).



This entry was posted on Wednesday, December 26th, 2012 at 8:37 pm and is filed under [Canadian Politics](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can [leave a response](#), or [trackback](#) from your own site.

3 Responses to “Thoughts on the Fair Vote Canada Internal Referendum”

1.  *B. Ross Ashley* says:
[December 30, 2012 at 9:09 am](#)

Thank you for that, Stuart, it really cuts to the core of what RaBIT is actually campaigning for. And it decides me – I’m against it.

2.  *Bob Jonkman* says:
[December 30, 2012 at 1:56 pm](#)

Municipal political parties are legal in nearly every province.

Is that a typo? Did you mean that municipal political parties are **illegal**?

The [Municipal Elections Act](#) of Ontario makes no mention of parties other than “holding parties and making other

expressions of appreciation”

When I worked at the City of Toronto in the Mayor’s and Councillors’ offices it was a commonly held belief that party politics was outlawed, although it was easy to detect the Councillors’ philosophical affiliation with certain parties.

Finally, the municipal council term after Toronto’s amalgamation (1998) had two Councillors per ward (elected by a non-proportional block vote; 56 Councillors in 28 wards), and prior to that each ward had a Regional and Municipal Councillor (elected separately). The 2000 municipal election had redefined ward boundaries with only one Councillor in each of the 44 wards. So it certainly is possible to change election law and ward boundaries to allow multi-member wards and a proportional outcome.

–Bob.

3.  [Stuart Parker](#) says:
[December 30, 2012 at 3:27 pm](#)

Thanks for your comments, Bob.

Ontario is exceptional in its infringement on the political rights of its citizens to form parties at the municipal level. While municipal parties are regulated, legal entities in the other three large provinces, Ontario has enacted laws to suppress them, not simply by denying them legal standing but limiting non-incumbent councilor fundraising to 10 of the 48 months in the electoral cycle.

And you’re quite right to point out that less than 15 years ago, Toronto had multi-member wards. The portrayal of multi-member wards as unachievable is part of the spin by the IRV crew.

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