

Analysis

Electoral reform could have big impact on Canada's smallest parties

'The real innovations in politics and public policy start at the fringes'

By [Éric Grenier](#), [CBC News](#) Posted: Sep 17, 2016 5:00 AM ET Last Updated: Sep 17, 2016 5:00 AM ET

When it comes to changing Canada's electoral system, who is standing up for the little guy?

The special committee on electoral reform will be hitting the road next week to hear directly from Canadians on changing the way they vote. The committee is made up of members from each of the five parties with representation in the House of Commons.

But there are a lot more parties in Canada than that.

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In addition to these five, Elections Canada lists 14 other registered federal parties in the country. Altogether, these parties received just under 92,000 votes in the last election.

The first-past-the-post (FPTP) system can be particularly punishing for little parties, something the Greens knew about before Elizabeth May became their first elected MP in 2011. But a change to the electoral system — the government has promised that the 2015 election will have been the last decided by FPTP — could be a game-changer for even smaller parties.

Little parties, big problems

The potential for small parties to win a seat in FPTP is very low, as it requires supporters to be concentrated in one part of the country. With 36,775 votes, the Libertarian Party would have had no trouble electing a candidate in 2015 if those voters all lived in one riding. When scattered across the country, however, that becomes impossible.

FPTP forces small parties to change how they would otherwise campaign.

In 2015, the Christian Heritage Party (CHP) decided not to run candidates in certain ridings in order to avoid splitting the vote and hurting Conservative MPs that they backed for re-election.

Rather than focus primarily on getting any of its own candidates elected, the Animal Alliance Environment Voters Party (AAEVP) instead ensured it was running enough candidates to give it a national spending allowance large enough to have an impact on the campaign, according to Stephen Best, the party's chief agent and co-founder. For example, the party used some of its resources to endorse a New Democrat candidate running in a British Columbia riding.

But FPTP is not a problem for small parties just because it doesn't get them elected.

"It's about the policy, not about the colour of the ballot," says Best. "First-past-the-post produces bad policy. It's not responsive to new and innovative ideas."

"People who are politically marginalized often go to parties like ours ... because we understand that if it wasn't for us 'crazies' you wouldn't have gay marriage recognized, you wouldn't have women's votes, you wouldn't have universal education, none of this stuff if it wasn't for the 'weirdos' starting the process."

No consensus for reform

But though the little parties face a lot of the same challenges, their solutions vary as greatly as their worldviews do.

Proportional representation is supported by the Marxists-Leninists, the Communists, and the Pirate Party, while Christian Heritage backs mixed-member proportional representation (MMP), as long as it doesn't cost more than the present system. The Animal Alliance is in favour of single-transferable voting (STV), while some other small parties, like the Progressive Canadian Party, think FPTP is better than the alternatives.

Tim Moen, the leader of the Libertarian Party, says that though he promoted MMP himself in the last campaign, the party's position is that it is something that should be up to individual candidates.

"Generally speaking, our primary concern is that government has so much power that it doesn't matter much who gets elected," said Moen in an email. "We'd prefer a

world where government has so little power that it doesn't matter much who gets elected."

But most small parties agree that a change to the system would give them a better chance of getting into the House of Commons.

"There is a political market for our issue," says Best. "Under STV or even MMP, we can actually benefit from that market, and the people who vote for us can benefit from it as well."

However, the changes being considered by the electoral reform committee do not go far enough for everyone.

"We're opposed to the existing party-dominated system where parties come to power," says Anna Di Carlo, leader of the Marxist-Leninist Party. "We think that the reforms that are needed are ones that would empower people to come to power themselves."

According to Moen, "the system that most accurately represents the 'will of the people,' if there is such a thing, is a free market where the cost of implementing an individual's preferences aren't borne by other individuals without their consent."

A low bar to meet

If the government proposes any sort of proportional representation in its electoral reform package, the question of what threshold would need to be met in order to win a seat will have a big impact on the fortunes of smaller parties.

And that goes for the Greens and Bloc Québécois, both of which took less than five per cent of the vote nationwide in last year's election, a threshold that many countries use.

But other countries use a lower threshold. In the Netherlands, the threshold is as low as whatever is needed to win one seat in the legislature. With 338 seats in Canada's House of Commons, that national threshold for Canada would be just around 0.3 per cent.

Christian Heritage backs a low threshold — one per cent would give a party three seats, for instance, though five per cent would be acceptable to the CHP — but Rod

Taylor, leader of the party, feels that whatever threshold is settled on would be achievable. If voters feel they are not wasting votes, they may be much more likely to cast a ballot for a party if it will go towards electing an MP, even if that party has no real chance of taking power.

But even with a change, says Best, "the odds of us electing anybody are low. But [with a new system] they're not a snowball's chance in hell."

Every voice represented

For Canada's small parties, electoral reform is not just about giving them a better chance of winning seats. It is about getting their voices heard.

"People who have views such as ours," says Taylor, "are under-represented in Parliament."

"When Elizabeth May got her first seat," he says, "that made a difference for the country. It is good that citizens who hold certain views have an opportunity to have those views expressed in Ottawa."

It might also help legitimize those views. Taylor believes that a new system might give his party a chance to take a larger share of the vote, which would then give the signal to other voters in subsequent elections that a party like his is a serious option.

"Any other political voice," says Di Carlo, "except for those that are now in the House of Commons, are marginalized, they're ridiculed, they're made fun of."

But according to Best, having these views in the House of Commons would improve the lives of Canadians — and faster than would be the case under FPTP.

"The real innovations in politics and public policy start at the fringes," he says. "It always does It would be better if these ideas could be embraced in a legislature."

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