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The Alternative Vote

(or Instant Run-off Voting):

It's no solution for the democratic deficit



Fair Vote Canada campaigns for voting systems based on the core democratic principle – equal representation for all voters. Only when every voting citizen has a representative of his or her own choosing does the democratic majority in Parliament have a legitimate mandate to govern.

For that reason, Fair Vote Canada campaigns for democratic electoral reform: to replace the current system of undemocratic winner-take-all voting with fair (proportional) voting for the election of parliament and other legislative bodies.

By contrast some are now proposing that Canadians embrace another winner-take-all system - the Alternative Vote (AV) or Instant Run-off Vote (IRV) - instead of switching directly to a fair and proportional voting system.

Here's why AV is *not* the answer to Canada's democratic deficit.

What is fair voting?

Fair voting systems are based on the core democratic principle – voter equality. Fair voting systems to elect legislatures get as close as possible to treating all voters

equally, regardless of their political beliefs or place of residence.

What is winner-take-all voting?

Winner-take-all voting systems by contrast require voters to compete against one another for parliamentary representation – creating winners and losers. In each riding, one group of voters – those with the most popular partisan view – will elect an MP and have representation. All others, often the majority, are losers. They elect nobody and are thus subjected to taxation without representation – a profoundly undemocratic condition.

Are there different types of winner-take-all voting?

Yes – plurality systems and majoritarian systems.

Canada uses a plurality system, first-past-the-post. To win the successful candidate needs only one more vote than any other candidate. In a multi-candidate contest 30 to 40 per cent of the vote is usually enough to elect an MP, MLA/MPP or councillor.

AV and other majoritarian systems require the winning candidate to gain support from at least 50 per cent of the voters plus one. Plurality and majoritarian systems differ slightly but share a dominant characteristic. They both divide voters into those who win representation and *many* who get none. Both by design negate the democratic principle of equal representation for every voter.

How does AV work?

It's similar to the current voting system. Voters in each riding or ward elect just one MP, MLA/MPP or councillor, but they do so by ranking their candidate preferences 1-2-3 on the ballot.

A candidate receiving more than 50 per cent of the first-choice votes wins outright. If no candidate reaches 50 per cent the least popular candidate is dropped and those ballots are reassigned to the second preference candidates – and so on until one candidate accumulates 50 per cent of the ballots plus one.

What's wrong with that? Isn't democracy about majority rule?

Representative democracy is indeed about majority rule – *after* all citizens are fairly represented in the parliament, legislature or council. All citizens have the right to representation, even if they do not belong to a partisan majority in the community where they live.

Does AV give voters more say? Would it eliminate the need for strategic voting?

AV allows a voter to say a little more on his or her ballot by ranking candidates or parties, but to little avail. You can cast a sincere vote for your preferred candidate –

but if you know or suspect your first choice will not win, then you may try to affect the outcome with your second choice. Even if your second choice does not represent your views well, you may hope that candidate will beat another candidate you like even less. In practice these second and third choices seldom have any practical effect on election outcomes.

AV elections in Australia¹ have shown that the second choices on ballots tip the balance in only a small number of seats. In 21 elections between 1919 and 1996, only six per cent of the leading first-choice candidates were defeated by the distribution of second choices.² In Manitoba and Alberta, where AV was used for 15 elections over three decades, second choices changed the outcome only 2 per cent of the time.³

Regardless of who wins the seats the AV results still leave a large portion of the electorate without the representation it wants and deserves. Many Canadians already live in ridings and wards represented by a politician they do not support. AV offers these legions of orphaned voters no new hope.

¹ Australia, Fiji and New Guinea are the only countries that use AV for parliamentary elections. See Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook, pp. 166-173.

² Alternative Voting or Mixed Member/Proportional: What Can We Expect?, Policy Options, July-August 2001, p. 42.

³ Harold Jansen, The Political Consequences of the Alternative Vote: Lessons from Western Canada, Canadian Journal of Political Science, September 2004, p. 666.

Would AV help small parties get established and win seats?

Not at all. AV would make it easy for voters to give smaller parties their first choice vote and their second choice to a larger party with a better chance of winning a seat. It is formalized strategic voting. But actual AV election results show that supporters of small parties are no more likely to gain representation with AV than with the current system.

AV exaggerates the tendency of the current system to direct all voters into a choice between two big-tent political parties.

Looking at the Western Canadian experience over three decades, political scientist Harold Jansen concluded: "AV was associated with an increased number of parties seeking office (the number of electoral parties) but not with an increased number of parties represented in the legislature (the number of legislative parties)."⁴

Australia provides an interesting contrast because it uses AV to elect its House of Representatives and STV (a proportional system) to elect its Senate. In the 2007 election for the House, the Green Party received 8 per cent of the votes but failed to win a single one of the 150 seats. In the Senate election held at the same time, the Green Party received 9 per cent of the votes and won 3 of 40 seats.

Would AV fix the problem of single party domination in particular regions?

No. Under the current system, large parties and parties with support concentrated in particular regions of the country win many

⁴ Ibid., p. 665.

more seats than their popular support warrants while supporters of other parties gain little or no representation. For example, Liberals in the West and Conservatives in Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal are almost always underrepresented in Parliament.

These distortions in representation exacerbate regional tensions in Canada, but AV could make them even worse. A study looking at the possible effects of a wide variety of voting systems on federal election results in 1980 and 2000 found "for almost all parties regional imbalances would have been worsened if we adopted AV even (though slightly) more than under SMP [single-member plurality, or first-past-the-post]."⁵

Would AV resolve the systematic underrepresentation of women and minority groups?

No. In AV's winner-take-all single-member districts the formidable barriers to the nomination and election of candidates from underrepresented groups remain unchanged.

The multi-member districts typical of fair voting systems compel most parties to nominate a number of candidates, thus encouraging more social diversity in nominations and election results.

Could AV be worse than first-past-the post in distorting overall election results?

Possibly. Studies find AV produces minimal differences from election results under first-

⁵ Harold Jansen and Alan Siaroff, Regionalism and Party Systems: Evaluating Proposals to Reform Canada's Electoral System, in Steps Toward Making Every Vote Count (2004), Henry Milner, ed., p. 61.

past-the-post, but it does have the potential to skew results in a particular manner.

For example, in the 1997 federal election the Liberals won 38 per cent of the vote but captured 51 per cent of the seats – the phoniest majority government in Canadian history. A study of voter preferences⁶ in that election projected that the Liberals would have gained 57 per cent of the seats with the same level of support had AV been used. Why? When forced to rank parties, most voters who supported other parties ranked the Liberals second, not because they wanted Liberal representation but because they disliked other parties even more. Similar projections of the 1980 and 2000 federal elections also showed the Liberal Party gaining even larger majorities under AV than first-past-the-post.⁷

Neither the BC Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, nor any of the recent federal and provincial commissions examining voting system alternatives in Canada, have recommended AV for parliamentary elections.

The Jenkins Commission, a blue ribbon panel on electoral reform in the UK, set up by the Labour government in 1997, concluded that AV outcomes would be even less proportional than first-past-the-post.⁸

Is there any place in modern democracy for AV?

Yes, but a very small place. AV is absolutely inappropriate for parliamentary elections where the objective is to give equal representation to all voters.

Democrats consider AV part of the reform package for some very limited applications. Where the objective is to choose the most popular candidate for a one-person job – for example a party leader, speaker of the legislature or president – then AV is better than first-past-the-post.

Is switching from our current voting system to AV for parliamentary elections likely to be a step toward fair voting in the foreseeable future?

No. Societies rarely change their voting systems for parliamentary, legislature or council elections. When those scarce opportunities arise by popular demand, proposals for cosmetic change are diversionary and may make the legislatures even less representative. Some established politicians are only too willing to misdirect public opinion in the name of reform. Democrats must be constant in the demand for fair democratic representation for every citizen and nothing less.

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⁶ L'impact mécanique du vote alternatif au Canada: une simulation des élections de 1997, by Antoine Bilodeau, Canadian Journal of Political Science, December 1999.

⁷ Jansen and Siaroff, p. 57-58.

⁸ Jenkins Commission report, paragraph 82.