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2011 Provincial Election Distortion - Saskatchewan Joins the List!

By Don Mitchell

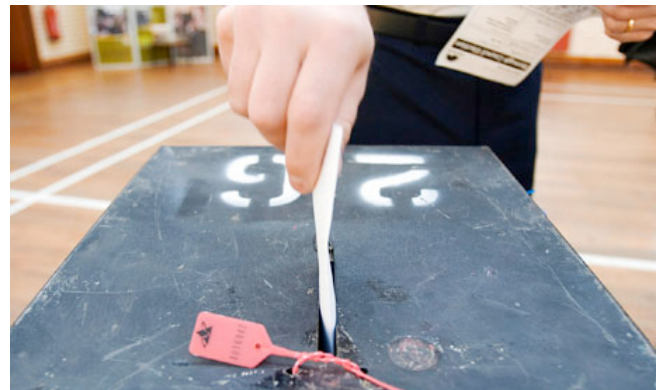
With 64% of the popular vote, the Saskatchewan Party gained 84.5% of the seats in the November 7th provincial election. They might easily have swept every seat in the province, as occurred with the McKenna Liberals with 60% of the popular vote in New Brunswick in 1987.

Under our failed electoral system anytime a party has 50% or more of the popular vote, they gain at the very least 65% of the seats. So the election result in Saskatchewan, though skewed, was actually more balanced than might have been expected.

In four previous Saskatchewan elections since 1955 when the popular vote for the leading party was narrowly over 50%, that party gained from 75% to 90 % of the seats. This gave exaggerated “sweeps” for the NDP in 1971 and 1991, Grant Devine’s Conservatives in 1982, and Brad Wall’s Saskatchewan Party in 2007.

In Saskatchewan’s 106-year history, only one election result actually matched popular vote for each party to the number of seats gained in the legislature. That was in 1929, when the Conservative Party, along with Progressives and independents, formed a coalition government to replace the longstanding Liberals.

This fall in Canada’s five provincial elections (Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan), the results have produced distorted results for the leading party when comparing popular vote to seats won (see chart).



Smaller parties are consistently under-represented in seats compared to their popular vote. The Green Party has never gained a single member in any provincial election and has only one federal member. Based on their percentage of voter support, they should have won at least 15 seats in the last federal election and representation in every provincial election in which they garnered support of 3% or more.

Major party leaders refuse to address the undemocratic nature of the system because they have the most to gain from the distortions which occur.

Most democracies in all world regions except North America have some version of proportional representation (PR) in which every vote cast carries some weight toward the final results in legislative seats. While no perfect system of representation exists, they are all eminently fairer than the systems which remain entrenched in Canada and the United States. Even within Britain there are proportional systems in the parliamentary elections for Scotland and Wales.



The 'first- past- the- post system' we cling to always exaggerates representation for the leading party. It discredits and minimizes minority challenges which voters may wish to support. The system doesn't represent the expressed will of the people and it actively discourages democratic participation. Votes for opposition candidates are summarily discarded in the electoral result.

In election contests when one party has a strong lead indicated in advance polling, citizens are discouraged from voting because they know their votes won't count in the final result. In the

recent one-sided contest in Saskatchewan, voter turn-out dropped to 62% from a much higher 76% in a closer race in 2007.

The print and broadcast media accept and reinforce the distortions of the present system. Minority parties are ignored in media coverage when attempting to present their platforms. The Saskatchewan media excluded minority parties from the leadership debate broadcast province-wide. The Liberal, Green and Progressive Conservative parties were excluded on the grounds that in the present system these parties had no probability of electing any members. This would not be the case under a proportionate system where every vote counted toward the party standings in the legislature.

A proportional system in Saskatchewan would grant a share of parliamentary voice to Liberal, Green and Progressive Conservative voters. In the 2007 election the Liberals would have ended up with four or five MLAS and the Green Party would have had one. In the 2011 election, with no probability of seats, the Liberals did not even field candidates in most constituencies. They effectively abandoned their lifelong supporters who had to either abstain or default their votes to one of the major parties. Only in a system where all votes are weighted equally can a true democracy exist.

However, only the NDP and the Green Party have raised the issue of electoral reform, with only the Greens adopting an open and consistent commitment to reform. Electoral reform has long been debated as an issue in the Saskatchewan New Democratic Party. At the provincial convention held in Moose

Jaw in 2005 the party adopted a policy to consult and engage the public in discussing and acting on options for proportional representation. Unfortunately the party limited the process to discussion in the legislative caucus about possible alternatives. The public was not engaged in considering alternatives and no effective leadership emerged on the question.

The matter was raised only in the context of the 2007 election campaign when then-Premier Lorne Calvert promised a process to consider and implement electoral reforms. It was a matter of too little and too late as the party went down to an exaggerated defeat under the old system. With 50% of the vote, the Saskatchewan Party gained 66% of the seats. Ironically the New Democratic Party has suffered exaggerated losses from a system they were reluctant to change.

It is at least reasonable to hope that as part of their party renewal under a new generation of leaders, the NDP will finally adopt a commitment to implement electoral reforms including a proportionate system of representation.

Don Mitchell is a Moose Jaw city councillor, a former community development worker and a long time writer, researcher and activist on issues of the left. He is also an acting co-chair of the Fair Vote Canada Saskatchewan chapter, author of "The Politics of Food" and a former federal candidate for the New Democratic Party.

A meeting on the future of Fair Vote Saskatchewan will be held at the Craik Eco Centre on January 29th, 2:00 p.m. For more details, contact Don Mitchell at: donmitchell@sasktel.net

2011: A Year of Provincial Election Distortion

PROVINCIAL ELECTION	VOTE % OF WINNING PARTY	SEAT % OF WINNING PARTY	ELECTION WINNER
Saskatchewan	64.40%	84.45%	Saskatchewan Party
Prince Edward Island	51%	82.00%	Liberal Party
Newfoundland and Labrador	56%	77.00%	Conservative Party
Manitoba	46%	63.00%	New Democrats
Ontario	37%	49.00%	Liberal Party

Voter Participation and Electoral System by Country

COUNTRY	% VOTER TURNOUT	ELECTORAL SYSTEM
Belgium	93	Proportional Representation
Italy	89	Multi-Member Plurality
Norway	83	Proportional Representation
Germany	78	Proportional Representation
Greece	77	Proportional Representation
United Kingdom	76	First-Past-the-Post
Spain	70	Proportional Representation
Canada	69	First-Past-the-Post
France	65	Majority Run-Off
United States	38	First-Past-the-Post

Comparative 1995 National Election Results