

The Case for Proportional Representation in BC: Summary of the Evidence HSA Research Brief – September 2018

Proportional Representation and the BC Context

Proportional representation (pro rep) is a voting system in which political parties gain seats in proportion to the number of votes cast for them. In majoritarian¹ or “winner-takes-all” voting systems, the share of votes cast for parties are not proportional to the seats in the legislature. In BC, we use a majoritarian voting system called First-Past-the-Post in which voters select one candidate in their riding and, whichever candidate receives the most votes, wins (even if this is a plurality and not an absolute majority of votes).

Since 1953 in BC, 16 out of 17 elections have resulted in “false majority” governments, whereby the winning party’s overall share of the vote is much less than their share of seats in the Legislative Assembly.² For example, in 1996, the BC NDP received only 39% of votes (Liberals 42%) but the NDP formed a majority government. In 2005, 2009, and 2013, the BC Liberals won false majorities with less than 50% of the vote. First-Past-the-Post routinely gives majority governments to parties that receive 40% of votes, giving parties without majority support, the ability to pass laws and policies that are not supported by the majority of the electorate. Pro rep guarantees that every vote matters: when everyone’s vote counts, politicians must be more cooperative and are more accountable to voters.

Over 90 countries use a pro rep voting system, including over 80% of OECD countries that are comparable with BC and Canada based on their democratic institutions and level of social and economic development.³ They include New Zealand, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Scotland, and many others. The US, Canada, and the UK are outliers that use First-Past-the-Post (However, within the UK, the devolved governments of Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, and the London Assembly have pro rep.).

The following sections make the case for pro rep in BC based on a summary of the research evidence.

Increased Public Funding for Health Care and Social Services

Research has shown that pro rep democracies spend an average of 4.75 percentage points more on social expenditures than majoritarian democracies.⁴ This means more funding available for a variety of social programs, including health care, social services, affordable housing, education and early child development.

Although comparative health system analysis is complex, BC (and Canada) tend to spend less than a number of pro rep democracies with internationally recognized universal health systems (see Figure 1).⁵

¹ “Majoritarian” includes voting systems that are based on plurality like our current First-Past-the-Post system. Majoritarian is the term used in the research literature.

² Fair Vote Canada, <https://www.fairvote.ca/campaign-resources/>. See also: Fair Vote Canada’s research brief at <https://www.fairvote.ca/a-look-at-the-evidence/>.

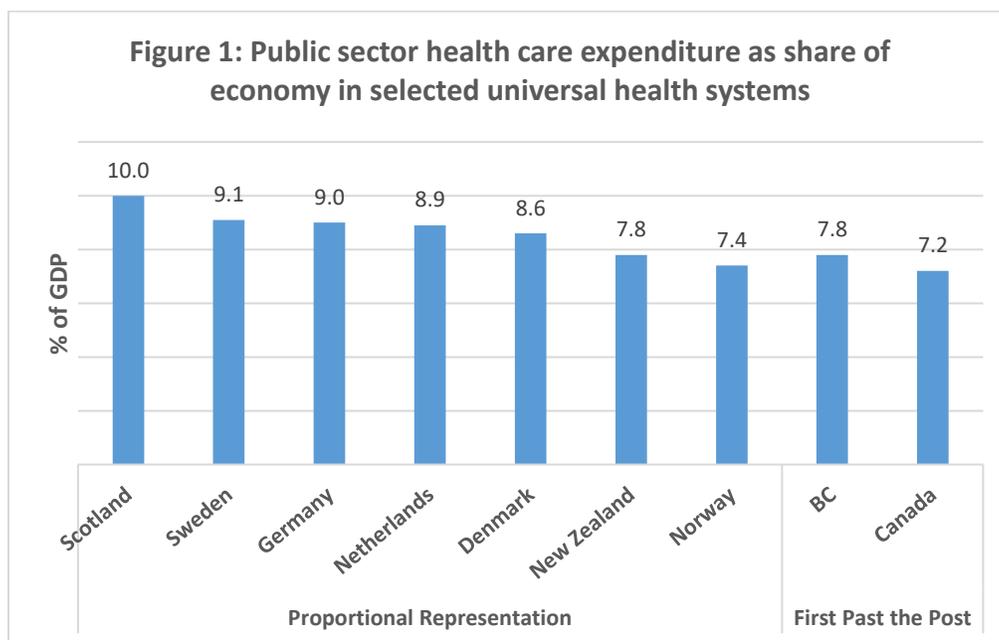
³ Fair Vote Canada, <https://www.fairvote.ca/pr4bc-faqs-mythbusters/>.

⁴ A. Lijphart (2012), *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in 36 Countries*, New Haven: Yale Press, p. 289.

⁵ Figure 1 sources: OECD Health Statistics 2018, <http://www.oecd.org/els/health-systems/health-data.htm>; D. Steel & J. Cylus (2012), United Kingdom (Scotland): Health system review, *Health Systems in Transition* 19(9), p. xviii; BC Budget and Fiscal Plan, 2018/19 – 2020/21, p. 143.

By looking at public expenditure as a share of the total economic pie (share of Gross Domestic Product), we can examine how much we invest as a society on important social programs, such as public health care. In 2012, BC funding for health care was 7.8% of our GDP – notably lower than other leading universal health care systems internationally including Scotland, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, and Denmark. However, BC public health care spending as a share of GDP is projected to fall to 7.3% by 2020/21.⁶ This means that despite a growing economy we are not maintaining a level of spending that aligns with our province’s prosperity. Canadian universal health care consistently receives high levels of public support and is one of our most cherished Canadian values. With pro rep there is certainty that the majority support for high-quality health care and social services is accurately reflected in government policymaking.

Political scientist Arend Lijphart’s seminal study analyzing pro rep and majoritarian systems in 36 countries and Salomon Orellana’s study did not find any statistically significant relationship between voting systems and economic growth. However, discussed in the following section, democracies that use pro rep have less social inequality and higher levels of social development. A large body of research demonstrates the corrosive effects of inequality on society,⁷ and that inequality hurts economic growth.⁸



Better Public Policy and Less Inequality

More collaborative political cultures can foster better public policy where politicians work together across party lines to address social, economic and environmental problems and develop long-term solutions.⁹ First-Past-the-Post politics tend to waste time and public resources – leading to “policy lurch” – where

⁶ BC Budget and Fiscal Plan, 2018/19 – 2020/21, p. 143, http://bcbudget.gov.bc.ca/2018/bfp/2018_Budget_and_Fiscal_Plan.pdf.

⁷ R. Wilkinson & K. Pickett (2009), *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, London: Penguin.

⁸ F. Cingano (2014), Trends in Income Inequality and Its Impact on Economic Growth, *OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Paper Series 163*, <http://www.oecd.org/newsroom/inequality-hurts-economic-growth.htm>.

⁹ S. Orellana (2014), *Electoral Systems and Governance: How Diversity Can Improve Policy Making*, New York: Routledge; S. Klein & V. Saran (2018), *The case for electoral reform*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives – BC Office, <https://www.policynote.ca/the-case-for-electoral-reform/>.

false majority governments will spend a good deal of time trying to undo the policies of the previous government.¹⁰ The ability to avoid the problem of policy lurch means that pro rep democracies have developed innovative solutions to complex problems including:

Poverty and inequality: Poverty and inequality are upstream social determinants of individual and population health. Policy interventions to reduce poverty and inequality may include the use of fiscal policies, early childhood development and education, health care services and social programs, workforce development and labour policies.

A number of academic studies have examined pro rep and inequality including: a 2005 study of 28 democracies that found when proportionality increases, inequality fell,¹¹ a 2006 study that demonstrated pro rep is associated with greater efforts to promote redistributive income policies,¹² and a 2015 study of 24 democracies that found low-income citizens' political preferences were better represented under pro rep (whereas wealthier citizens have better representation under majoritarian systems),¹³ and Lijphart's 2012 landmark study found pro rep countries had lower levels of income inequality.¹⁴

Public health scholars have pointed out that "it has...been documented that poverty rates and government support in favour of health – the extent of government transfers – is higher when popular vote is more directly translated into political representation through proportional representation. Canada ... does not have proportional representation – the lack of which is associated with higher poverty rates and less government action in support of health."¹⁵

Human development and social welfare: Research looking at 610 elections over 60 years in 81 countries found that pro rep had higher scores on the UN Human Development Index which includes health, education and standard of living indicators. Researchers have noted that Human Development Index provides a good overall measure of government performance in the delivery of public goods and promotion of social welfare.¹⁶

Environment: Pro rep democracies have better environmental performance than majoritarian democracies based on the Environmental Performance Index produced by experts at Yale and Columbia Universities, which includes 25 indicators in ten policy areas such as environmental health, air quality, water resource management, biodiversity and habitat, forestry, fisheries, agriculture and climate change.¹⁷

¹⁰ Klein & Saran, 2018. See also: A. Himelfarb (2016), Why proportional representation is likely to produce better public policy, *Behind the Numbers*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, <http://behindthenumbers.ca/2016/10/11/proportional-representation-likely-produce-better-public-policy/>.

¹¹ V. Verardi (2005), Electoral systems and income inequality, *Economics Letters* 86(1), pp. 7-12.

¹² T. Iversen & D. Soskice (2006), Electoral systems and the politics of coalitions: Why some democracies redistribute more than others, *American Political Science Review* 100(2), pp. 165-81.

¹³ G. Bernauer & Rosset (2015), Mind the gap: Do proportional electoral systems foster a more equal representation of men and women, poor and rich? *International Political Science Review* 36(1), pp. 78-98.

¹⁴ Lijphart, 2012.

¹⁵ D. Raphael, A. Curry-Stevens, T. Bryant (2008), Barriers to addressing the social determinants of health: Insights from the Canadian experience, *Health Policy* 88, pp. 222-235.

¹⁶ J. M. Carey & S. Hix (2011), The Electoral Sweet Spot: Low-magnitude Proportional Electoral Systems, *American Journal of Political Science* 55(2), pp. 383-397.

¹⁷ Lijphart, 2012, p. 289. Lijphart's study found pro rep democracies score more than 6 percentage points higher than majoritarian democracies.

Criminal justice: Pro rep democracies have criminal justice policies that are less punitive, with fewer people in prison and less or no use of capital punishment.¹⁸ Specifically, “[t]he [pro rep] democracies put almost 60 fewer people per hundred thousand population in prison than the majoritarian democracies.”¹⁹

Prudent Management of Public Finances

Academic research demonstrates that pro rep democracies are more likely to have larger fiscal surpluses or lower deficits than less proportional systems, and lower levels of national debt.²⁰ This is significant considering that pro rep democracies spend, on average, more on social expenditures than majoritarian democracies as noted above.

More Women Elected to Political Office

Based on the comparison of 36 countries, research shows that the share of women elected to parliamentary bodies was 8 percentage points higher in pro rep countries.²¹ Canada, the US, the UK, France and Australia’s lower house all have majoritarian voting systems and have low rates of women in their legislatures. In contrast, legislatures in New Zealand, Germany, Sweden, and Denmark – countries that have pro rep – have over 30% women elected. Sweden is at the top at 45%.²²

Additional Benefits of Proportional Representation

Increased voter turnout and greater satisfaction with government: Voter turnout was, on average, 7.5 percentage points higher in pro rep democracies than majoritarian systems.²³ Citizens were more satisfied with their country’s democratic institutions even when their preferred party was not in power.²⁴ This is important in light of disturbing trends that turnout is declining and citizens feeling that “voting doesn’t matter”.

More co-operative politics: Pro rep democracies are found to be “kindler, gentler democracies”²⁵ where coalition governments are more common and require parties to work together. The result can be better, more sophisticated policies that have received greater, more diverse input in their development. In fact, Canada’s most popular social programs – Canada Pension Plan, Old Age Security, and our public health care system – were created under federal minority governments where parties had to work together. Today, we are witnessing the rise of divisive politics where democratic institutions and evidence-based public policies are under attack²⁶ by politicians elected through false majorities and who do not represent the majority of voters.²⁷ Pro rep can help mitigate the rise of extremism.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 291-292.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 292.

²⁰ Orellana, 2014.

²¹ Lijphart, 2012.

²² P. Norris (2004), *Electoral Engineering: Voting Rules and Political Behavior*, Cambridge University Press.

²³ Lijphart, 2012, p. 285.

²⁴ Lijphart, 2012.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Doug Ford and the threat to democratic norms in Canada [Editorial] (2018, Sep. 13), *The Globe and Mail*, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/editorials/article-globe-editorial-doug-ford-and-the-threat-to-democratic-norms-in/>.

²⁷ For example, Donald Trump was elected with 46.1% of the vote, and Doug Ford’s Ontario majority government received 40.5% of the vote.

More choices for voters: As Seth Klein and Vyas Saran of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives note, “The views of nearly five million British Columbians are more diverse than what two parties can offer. But our current system makes it almost impossible for independent politicians and non-dominant parties to be competitive ... Our current two-party system narrows our political choices and limits our discourse, discouraging bold and long-lasting policies.”²⁸

Proportional Representation Spotlight: Scotland

Scotland’s pioneering health policy innovations followed devolution from the UK in 1999 when Scots began to elect their new Scottish Parliament by the mixed member proportional voting system and gained full control over domestic policy (referred to as “devolution”).

Since devolution, Scotland has become recognized internationally for its forward-thinking and evidence-based policy approach to health and social care,²⁹ labour relations and workforce development,³⁰ and commitment to reducing poverty and inequality. In 1999, the first coalition government began to pursue a distinctive, consensual approach to health care policymaking and relations with frontline clinicians described as “partnership working” which “involves the Scottish Government, National Health Service (NHS) employers, trade unions and professional organizations working closely together to ensure that the NHS Scotland workforce is actively involved in the decisions which affect them.”³¹ One of the first policy matters the coalition government pursued was reversing health care privatization.³²

One of the major lessons from the Scottish experience is that policymaking has moved in a consistent and more sophisticated direction over time, thereby moving beyond the problem of “policy lurch” common to majoritarian democracies as discussed above. Successive governments have focused on policies that reduce health and social inequalities through the expansion and improvement of universal health and social care programs and a focus on inclusive economic growth.³³ For example, the Scottish Parliament introduced free home nursing care and residential long-term care for seniors, free public transportation for those over 60, and free university tuition.³⁴

²⁸ Klein & Saran, 2018.

²⁹ M. Dayan & N. Edwards (2017), *Learning from Scotland’s NHS*, London: Nuffield Trust, <https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/files/2017-07/learning-from-scotland-s-nhs-final.pdf>.

³⁰ N. Bacon & P. Samuel (2012), *Partnership in NHS Scotland, 1999-2011*, Nottingham University Business School, <http://www.staffgovernance.scot.nhs.uk/media/1384/nottingham-report.pdf>.

³¹ Scottish Government quoted in Bacon & Samuel (2012, p. 31).

³² See: S. Greer (2016), Devolution and health in the UK: policy and its lessons since 1998, *British Medical Bulletin* 118, pp. 17-25. One of the first policy initiatives was to dismantle the “internal market” in the Scottish National Health Service (NHS Scotland), in which public providers and for-profit companies had to compete for public funding and had the effect of entrenching the for-profit sector in the public health care system. The internal market (also referred to as the purchaser-provider split) had been established in by the UK Parliament (London) in the early 1990s.

³³ G. Scott & S. Wright (2012), Devolution, social democratic visions and policy reality in Scotland, *Critical Social Policy* 32(3), p. 449. See also: D. M. Fox (2013), Health inequality and governance in Scotland, *Public Health* 127, pp. 503-513.

³⁴ Scott & Wright, 2012, p. 443.