

Election reform needs discussion

Timmins Daily Press (ON)
Sat 21 Apr 2007
Page: A4
Section: Opinion
Byline:
Source:
Length: 600 words

When Ontario voters go to the polls in October, they will be casting a ballot for more than just their member of provincial parliament. The election will also include a referendum question about a new electoral system.

The current "first-past-the-post" system - single-member plurality (SMP), to use the high-falutin' term - elects a winner in each riding. Whoever has the most votes wins the seat, whether they won by 20,000 votes or by two votes. It's a system we inherited from England, and most of the older Commonwealth countries, like Australia, use it.

So does the United States. First-past-the-post has a number of advantages - most importantly, it usually creates majority governments. It exaggerates voting patterns. More votes land a big victory, and parties with fewer votes tend to have their numbers decrease. That's why the NDP often has a significantly smaller number of seats than whichever party came in second.

This system also has one obvious flaw: Governments elected via SMP often don't reflect the will of the people. When popular votes are compared to the proportion of seats, the numbers are rarely very close. In Canadian elections, it has been common to see the Liberals and Conservatives virtually neck-and-neck in the popular vote, yet one party ends up with a significantly exaggerated majority in the house.

More than half of voters didn't pick that party to win. Then there's the added complication of vote-splitting. Many people will remember when half the right-wing citizens chose the Progressive Conservative Party, while the other half went with the Canadian Alliance, allowing the Liberals to win in many tight races.

Today, the shoe is on the other foot: The Liberals, NDP and Green Party are having vote-splitting difficulties of their own. Election reform is happening - we can't blindly accept the status quo anymore without at least talking about the alternatives. Other provinces have worked on alternative plans, and Ontario has already enacted legislation giving the province a fixed election period.

Also worthy of note is the number of other governments using the SMP system. It's not very high. Despite the influence of the old British Empire, a majority of countries today use different methods. And in the 1970s, '80s and '90s, when former colonies and civil-war-torn countries drafted new constitutions, virtually no one picked first-past-the-post as the right way to go. So where does this leave us?

The McGuinty government appointed a citizens' panel to tour the province and ask voters what they want. Their answer - creating a mixed-member proportional system (MMP) - will be on a referendum ballot in October's provincial election. We'll explain what the MMP has to offer on this page in the days to come, but for now one thing is clear: Regardless of what we as a province decide to do, we need to talk about the options.

Election reform is an interesting idea, but it's not simple. Understanding exactly what our current system has to offer, and what alternatives may do instead, is vital for every person heading to the polls this fall. Premier Dalton McGuinty won't tell anyone his view, and has put a gag order on his cabinet. The very referendum question is being decided behind closed doors.

This is not at all the way to go. Referendums require a minimum voter turnout, and a minimum of 60 per cent of those voting must be in favour of the question. So before we go to the polls, let's have some serious, province-wide discussion on the issue. Hearing serious talk about the proposal from the premier wouldn't be a bad idea, either.