

**Review Essay - Democratic Leviathan: Defending First-Past-the-Post in Canada**

John Pepall, *Against Reform*, (University of Toronto Press).

Dale Smith, *The Unbroken Machine: Canada's Democracy in Action*, (Dundurn Press).

Lydia Miljan (ed.), *Counting Votes: Essays on Electoral Reform*, (Fraser Institute).

Andrew Potter, Daniel Weinstock and Peter Loewen (eds.), *Should We Change How We Vote? Evaluating Canada's Electoral System*, (McGill-Queens' University Press).

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For most of the twentieth century the superiority of the first-past-the-post voting system was largely assumed by Anglo-American political analysts. Whether commentators were American or British, their claims exuded a nativist confidence in their own institutions that rarely required argument or the presentation of facts. It was simply obvious to Americans and the British that their political systems were the zenith of democratic practice. What other countries did was either ignored or pathologized. If noted at all, the use of alternative voting systems was cast as exotic and deviant, with systems of proportional representation reduced to simplistic equations like PR = Nazi Germany = chaos. Sometimes Italy or Israel were substituted for the Germans, if a more contemporary example of the PR = instability equation was desired. But this consensus began to weaken in the 1980s as academics doing research on actual voting system effects discovered that countries using other systems did not automatically plunge into chaos or political stasis or extremism (Lijphart 1977; 1984). In fact, on a host of measures such countries were arguably seen to outperform the Anglo-American democracies. Then in the 1990s the issue moved beyond the academic realm to the arena of practical politics as a number of western countries changed their national voting systems or seriously considered doing so. As Pippa Norris noted at the time, political science as a field had few insights to contribute about why this was happening or took on the reform process it did (Norris 1994: 4). Since then, an enormous academic literature has emerged attempting to grapple with questions of voting system performance and change (for representative examples, see Shugart and Wattenberg 2001; Blais et al 2004; Colomer 2004; Gallagher and Mitchell 2005; Benoit 2007; Cusack et al 2010; Renwick 2010; Pilon 2013; Bowler and Donovan 2013; Herron et al 2018). An unreflexive nativist confidence in one's status quo institutions is now no longer sufficient to defend the use of any particular voting system.

Canada has not been immune to these international trends. Since the 1970s, the question of voting system reform has emerged repeatedly at both provincial and federal levels, for various reasons. And these trends have only intensified over time (for a comprehensive review, see Pilon 2017a). What was once seen as a rare event – politicians considering whether to change an established voting system – has now been repeated in a number of locales (e.g. federally and in British Columbia, Quebec, and Prince Edward Island). And while no reform effort has yet succeeded in replacing the country's traditional first-past-the-post voting system the almost

continual debate on the question has put pressure on those defending the status quo to actually argue their case for keeping it. Initially, the standard response from the country's political elites (i.e. those connected to the major political parties and the national media) was to simply ignore the issue or ridicule the idea that change was either possible or desirable. But as the various campaigns for change continued to emerge, opponents shifted to denigrating the alternatives to first-past-the-post by focusing on their complexity and 'strangeness,' while at the same time cherry-picking examples where such systems appeared to produce suboptimal results (Pilon 2009; 2010). Actually defending the first-past-the-post voting system in positive terms was not the priority as long as the alternative systems could simply be demonized to a public that knew little about their own voting system, let alone any of the alternatives.

The risk in the demonization strategy is that over time the various claims can be challenged and their impact diminished. This is, indeed, what occurred, particularly at the academic level where most Canadian researchers who focused on the topic discovered that western countries using systems other than first-past-the-post were not unstable, unrepresentative, or ungovernable (Milner 1999; 2004; Law Commission 2004; Pilon 2007). As more and more of the general public and critical opinion leaders became aware of the topic, it became harder to simply derail the conversation by reference to Italy and Israel or other cherry-picked examples. Still, all this mattered little without a governing party prepared to do something other than talk about the issue. This changed with the surprising election of a majority Liberal government federally in 2015. In opposition, running as the third party prior to their victory, the Liberals had promised to change the voting system if elected, a promise they promptly (and surprisingly) repeated upon taking office. Throughout 2016 the Liberals continued to reiterate their promise to 'make every vote count' and introduce a new voting system in time for the next federal contest. With a legislative majority, and the support of the Greens, NDP and the Bloc Quebecois for some form of proportional voting, it really did appear like change could be imminent. It was only at this juncture that some serious effort to defend the first-past-the-post voting system on its own terms finally emerged.

By 2017 two streams of argument had developed to defend first-past-the-post in Canada: one that could be characterized as capital 'C' Conservative, the other small 'l' liberal. Both still spend considerable time critiquing alternative voting systems and arguing why they would be wrong for Canada. But now they also set out a clear defence of first-past-the-post, utilizing a number of arguments, some novel, most not. They differ on certain points but in their broad analysis of the topic, their conclusions are surprisingly similar. The bottom line for both schools is that questions of governing stability trump all other values in assessing the worth of a voting system. Like Hobbes, they argue that a stable polity requires a single ruler who can make their will the law. For them, first-past-the-post creates this kind of 'democratic leviathan,' a stable, single-party majority government that can rule unhindered, until such time as it is decisively replaced by a competing potential leviathan in a general election. In making their case, the various authors also touch on questions relating to what democracy and elections are for, the proper role for political parties, and to what extent voters can be actually participate in the substance of politics.

The most sustained defence of first-past-the-post in Canada has come from the Conservative camp in the form of John Pepall's short book, *Against Reform*. The voting system is not the only theme of the book – Pepall offers up chapters arguing against a number of other popularly touted reforms (e.g. fixed election dates, parliamentary and Senate reform, direct democracy, etc.) – but it does garner the most attention here (five of the book's 13 chapters) and in other publications to which Pepall has contributed (Pepall 2011). Pepall is strongly opposed to changing the voting system, believing that first-past-the-post is already the most democratic voting system and thus in no need of reform. Pepall makes his case by defining what democracy, elections, legislatures and political parties are for in very specific and particular ways. A great deal of the persuasive force of his argument rests on whether one finds these definitions adequate or compelling.

Pepall's argument proceeds from his basic understanding of what elections are for. For him, an election is a process that allows voters to make a decision, first amongst the candidates in a local riding, and then, by extension, who should govern. He then defines political parties as organizations that exist only to vie for government. When voters choose a political party's local candidate, they are saying they think that party should govern, and they hold that party accountable by either continuing to support their local candidate or not. Central to Pepall's understanding of democracy itself is his claim that it is the voters who should determine the composition of government via their votes, to either sustain an existing administration or cast them out for the opposition. This is why he argues that Canada's first-past-the-post voting system is not in need of reform. It is already the most democratic voting system because it assures that government formation is decided by the voters. By contrast, proportional voting systems are undemocratic in Pepall's view because they take the decision about who will form government away from voters and give it to party elites who can negotiate coalition governments on which the public get no input.

So far there's nothing terribly novel in Pepall's arguments. His view of the proper role of political parties and parliament draws heavily from Walter Bagehot's *The English Constitution* while his reduction of democracy to simply choosing or rejecting a government is clearly influenced by the 'elite theory of democracy' promulgated by Joseph Schumpeter, Karl Popper, and others. Where he might be credited with innovation is in his creative use of voting theory, both to sustain his limited view of democracy and reject all forms of voting other than first-past-the-post. Drawing on Kenneth Arrow's theory of the 'paradox of voting' – which established that any voting system could lead to indeterminate results – Pepall argues that claims for superior results with proportional voting systems are false. As all voting systems produce this inescapable paradox, democracy and voting must be limited to the most basic decision, to keep or get rid of the government. For Pepall, only first-past-the-post can deliver this result – all other voting systems fail to produce this decision directly from the votes cast, thus removing control over government formation from the voters.

The logic of Pepall's argument is clear but that doesn't mean it's convincing, in large part because Pepall doesn't appear to be aware of the voluminous academic debates on the topics he is touching on. He tends to present his views about elections, parties, parliament and voting

systems as revealed truths rather than particular positions. Bluntly stated, the book does not meet academic standards of enquiry in terms of balance, knowledge of relevant literatures, and the use of evidence, which makes its publication in a university press somewhat perplexing. Book series editor Andrew Stark informs us in his preface that Pepall's book is "rooted in a deep reading of the literature," except that it is not. Pepall mostly cites journalists rather than the academic literatures germane to his topic. Of course, some might complain, can only academics write about democracy and democratic reform? Of course not. And here Stark defends the book as a unique perspective on the topic, a transparently conservative polemic against reform (Pepall ix). But such books usually see their authors draw from their own experience to evaluate and analyse the issues rather than selectively draw from the more academic sides of the topic. Pepall actually does the former in his chapters on fixed election dates, parliamentary reform, and direct democracy. Drawing from his obvious political experience and practical understanding of party politics, he makes effective common sense arguments about why such reforms don't tend to deliver the goods. But when he turns to voting systems, the informed reader quickly discovers how a little (academic) knowledge can be a dangerous thing.

Pepall either fails to read or misreads the voting system literature in two ways. His arguments against proportional voting – that it leads to the multiplication of parties, governing instability, over-weaning party control of politics, too much influence for small parties, etc. – fail to cite any systematic research on the issues and instead largely rely on anecdotal claims. Inconvenient counter evidence is simply ruled out. So Israeli experience proves the undue and improper influence of small parties, Italy demonstrates instability, Nazi Germany showcases extremism, etc. whereas the relative stability and success of postwar western Europe is simply dismissed. Pepall can't draw on his own political experience to assess countries using proportional voting as he clearly has little direct knowledge about them. Then Pepall misreads the voting theory literature in his attempt to use the 'paradox of voting' to discount arguments that proportional voting systems deliver more accurate results. Kenneth Arrow's paradox of voting claims that when voters face more than two choices it is possible that no one choice may emerge as the clear majority winner. Limitations of space prevent a detailed engagement with the full argument but, suffice it to say, Pepall misstates the theory and misunderstands its implications for voting systems. Pepall claims that "the paradox of voting ... confirm[s] that, where there is no majority, a majority cannot be contrived by summing up preferences or voting in stages or any other trick of electoral reform" (Pepall 50). But this is not what the paradox of voting says. The theory only claims that such inconclusive results are possible, not that they will or must occur in all cases. As Arrow himself admitted, "Most [voting] systems are not going to work badly all of the time. All I proved is that all can work badly at times" (McKenna 2008). Nor does Pepall appear to understand that the paradox of voting doesn't really apply to representative elections for two reasons. The first is that the left-right spread of voting typical in conventional elections means that a preferred majority is usually not hard to discern. The second is that where there can be more than one winning candidate, as with proportional voting, different groups of voters can all get the collective representation they desire, so no paradox arises (for a detailed treatment of the various popular and academic misreadings of Arrow's paradox of voting, see Mackie 2003).

The most serious weakness embedded in *Against Reform* is Pepall's basic framing of the discussion, namely that he somehow knows what democracy, parliament and parties 'really are' while his opponents have misunderstood their 'true' purpose. While he is free to defend his normative judgments about how our institutions should work, he can't pretend that there are not other credible views. For instance, the view that elections are primarily about voters deciding who should be the government is clearly a defensible position, drawing from Walter Bagehot's arguments about the British Parliament's 'efficient secret' in governing. But that doesn't make it the 'right' interpretation. Bagehot was a politician and political activist, not some unquestioned authority on the proper workings of British institutions. His views were not so much a reflection of his times – which saw weak party discipline, a lot of 'loose fish' politicians, and plenty of inefficient government – as much as a normative prescription for how he thought politics *should* work (Selinger and Conti 2015). And Bagehot's insights precede the rise of third party politics in the UK and elsewhere, a development that rendered many of his insights moot. Coming into the twentieth century political challenges from farmers, labour and socialists across western countries forced open the franchise, reinvented how political parties operated, and decisively altered the workings of legislatures (for systematic overviews of such developments, see Katznelson 1986; Mann 1993; Eley 2002; Sassoon 2014). Historical agency and contingency decided such questions, not post hoc functional reasoning or an appeal to particular experts. Pepall simply ignores what these challenges represented and how they altered the character of politics historically. If one doesn't accept his particular and idiosyncratic views about the allegedly 'true' purposes of democracy, elections, parliament and parties, his arguments favouring first-past-the-post largely collapse.

At a glance, Dale Smith's short book, *The Unbroken Machine: Canada's Democracy in Action*, appears remarkably similar to Pepall's *Against Reform*, both in content and rhetorical style. Smith is also against all manner of reforms – free votes for MPs, reforming the Senate, proportional voting, etc. – and, like Pepall, he suggests that the real problem lies in ignorance, not system dysfunction. Smith likens Canada's parliamentary democracy to a machine that only requires people – both voters and politicians – to understand how to operate it properly. His book then claims to set the record straight on just how Canada's parliament is supposed to function, what elections are meant to accomplish, and the proper role of the public, parties and politicians in making everything work. Along the same lines as Pepall, Smith argues that elections are primarily about choosing whether to sustain the government or elect a new one. But Smith makes more of the participatory aspects of political parties, arguing that they are the proper conduits for an active citizenry. Parties link a 'grassroots membership' to policy and create legitimacy for government action. He suggests that "grassroots involvement is the bedrock of our democratic system" and that the "vehicle for fully participating in democracy is party membership" (Smith 28). From there the links in the accountability chain are clear – the grassroots inform the party about what the public want and hold the party accountable through their local member. If the public is unhappy, the government will fail to win enough local contests in the next election to stay in power. With such a system functioning properly, the public is heard and governing accountability is assured.

So why isn't it working now? According to Smith it is because the public do not join and influence parties in sufficient numbers while at the same time parties do not engage the public effectively, and politicians fail to understand their proper role in parliament, which is to hold government accountable for its actions (rather than acting as ombuds-people for local constituents or pushing private members' bills). If the public and politicians would just return to these former practices, Smith implies, all would be well. Reform, on the other hand, would not fix the problems and only make things worse. Proportional representation specifically can't be applied to the Westminster system, he argues, because "the individual MPs are the basic representative unit" (Smith 54).

Smith's analysis is full of unsubstantiated 'shoulds' and 'musts.' He claims to know how our parliamentary democracy is meant to (should) work and what we need to (must) do to get it working. Yet his frame of reference for making such judgments is unclear. He claims Canadians have "forgotten the reasons why our system evolved the way that it did" and that we "should be looking to restore some of the things that we have already abandoned" so we can "re-engage with those parts of the machine of parliamentary democracy that we have not yet debased." This assessment suggests he knows where our system came from and the politics that have shaped it. As a ten-year parliamentary reporter and regular conservative blog post contributor, he clearly knows something about the practical workings of what has been going on in Ottawa recently. But that hardly gives him the kind of scope and perspective that would be required to offer such sweeping analysis as appears here. At one point, Smith even admits "I'm not about to suggest there was ever a 'golden age' of Canadian political discourse, or even civic literacy, because I simply have no metrics by which to compare it" (Smith 20). But his whole book is premised on just such an assumption, i.e. that he does know how things worked in the past, because it forms the basis for his justification that we should return to it now. It doesn't take much historical digging to demonstrate that his claims are more assertion than revelation of past truths.

Smith's problems begin with his title. Characterizing the interplay of Canada's governing and electoral systems as a 'machine' demonstrates a profound misunderstanding of British constitutional development. It is the American system that is machine-like, with its rigid operating and amending rules. By contrast, the British approach has always been more flexible and responsive to immediate and mobilized political opinion. It is precisely the flexibility of the Britain's 'unwritten' constitution that makes claims about its 'proper' functioning so weak (for an overview, see Coxall and Robins 1997, particularly chapter 6; for the depth of academic debates on the topic, see Norton 1989 and Bogdanor 2003). Smith is also poorly informed about Canadian political history. Canada's two national governing parties never had the historic grassroots participation he attributes to them. Until very recently, both Liberal and Conservative parties were largely and almost exclusively patronage machines, with only sporadic and short lived experiments in internal democracy (Whitaker 1977; Young and Cross 2002). Thus Smith invokes a past that never existed to support a metaphor that doesn't really apply to Canadian circumstances. His assertions about the proper role of MPs or the functioning of parliament are confounded by Canadian history and comparative experience from other British parliamentary systems. For instance, the claim that PR cannot be introduced in

Westminster systems because “the individual MPs are the basic representative unit” is obviously wrong: the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand have all seen PR introduced at different levels of government. Smith’s various claims about the negative workings of PR in other countries are equally bereft of evidence. As the links in his chain of reasoning are easily broken, his rationale for retaining first-past-the-post also falters.

The final conservative intervention is provided by the right-wing Fraser Institute in their slight e-book, *Counting Votes: Essays on Electoral Reform*. Editor Lydia Miljan promises that the four contributions to the volume will “look at the issue of electoral reform without pre-judging any one system over another,” except that most contributors were already on record as opposing any reforms before the e-book came out. John Pepall re-appears, making many of the same claims from his book while adding a few more misreadings of voting theory (this time on monotonicity) and misunderstandings of the workings of voting systems (this time demonstrating that he doesn’t understand the representational logic of the single transferable vote form of proportional representation). The Fraser Institute’s economists claim to provide evidence that countries using PR systems have higher public spending and more deficits than countries using first-past-the-post but fail to explain why this is a problem if it is what voters want. The authors appear to be arguing that voting system choices should be made on the basis of the policy outcomes they prefer rather than any democratic criteria. Then editor Lydia Miljan and Taylor Jackson argue that the use of the majoritarian alternative vote in Australia has led to minor parties having too much influence and high numbers of spoiled ballots, and would disproportionately benefit the federal Liberals in Canada. But both results in Australia have more to do with their compulsory preference ordering rule (that voters must rank every choice on the ballot or have their vote declared ‘spoilt’) than anything intrinsic to the logic of the alternative vote (Pilon 2015). As for Canada, the alternative vote’s impact would depend on which parties were most competitive in any given riding. Given the wide regional variation in major party support across the country, the Liberals would obviously not benefit everywhere.

In the book’s final contribution, Patrice Dutil argues that the government must submit any proposed change to the voting system to a national referendum. For Dutil, the fact that New Zealand, the UK and three Canadian provinces have recently used referenda amounts to precedents that have established a new constitutional convention. To support this claim Dutil invokes the preamble to the BNA Act 1867 which he claims “created a balance of power between the Crown, the Houses of Parliament, and the Courts” and “[t]he electoral system was a fundamental part of that bargain, based on conventions.” Except that the British and Canadian constitutions did not produce such a balance, and conventions, if they do matter, would actually support a very different process of voting system reform than Dutil describes. Dutil’s constitutional claims are, frankly, unfounded. Courts have had very limited influence in both British and Canadian systems until recently, while successive blows to royal power in the nineteenth century shifted the ‘balance’ of power to parliament in Britain, and then to the elected House of Commons after the second 1910 election (for an overview of these shifts, see Bogdanor 2003). Canadian experience was slightly different – Britain retained a veto over the Canadian parliament until 1931 but in practical terms seldom used it – so any ‘balance’ was decisively tipped in favour of Canadian legislatures. On voting systems, the record is pretty clear

in both the UK and Canada that parliament has and can change its own voting system. Of the ten successful changes to provincial voting systems in Canada since Confederation, all were simply passed as normal legislation (Pilon 2006).

That Conservative arguments favouring first-past-the-post are logically flawed and poorly supported might be seen as a problem by some – indeed, fatally self-defeating – but they would be mistaken. What readers need to understand is that the audience for these views is not the public at large or specialists in the media or academe but the Conservative base itself. The rush of Conservative tracts denouncing voting system reform is meant to warn less strategic Conservative supporters that the issue is not in the party's interest as well as provide an intellectual and objective veneer to a primarily self-interested political goal – to defend a voting system that serves Conservative interests, at all costs. Pepall's book came out before the recent voting system debates at the federal level and initially had a slightly different purpose: to squash any lingering Reform Party populism that might hinder a federal Conservative government. But his views have proven easily repurposed for the latest skirmish. Pepall's rhetoric, a combination of sarcasm, assertion, and a strategic use of anecdotal evidence, provides ready-made responses for a conservative readership already primed for his message.

Recall, of course, that Conservatives have had, until recently, quite a range of views on voting system reform. Stephen Harper's academic advisor Tom Flanagan spent many years championing the alternative vote to end vote-splitting among different federal conservative parties (Flanagan 1999). The Fraser Institute hosted a pro-reform conference on the topic in BC after the provincial right-wing party lost an election despite getting the most votes. And most recently Conservative national campaign director and former Chief of Staff in the PMO for Stephen Harper, Guy Giorno, endorsed changing Canada's voting system to some form of proportional voting as the 'right thing to do' (Carmichael 2016). Nor have Conservatives blindly defended first-past-the-post in the past. Canadian Conservatives stretching back to John A. have shown no hesitation in altering any time-honoured, traditional institutions if they were no longer seen as useful to the party, including the voting system (on electoral reforms generally, see Ward 1951; on voting system reform see Pilon 2006, 2017a). Pepall claims that his opposition to reform is not about making things "safe for conservatives" (152) but it's hard not to see how his arguments serve to bolster the federal party's electoral position in its present weak position. The basic problem is that today's national Conservative party appears to be unelectable under any other voting system. Thus, barring some shift back from their present far-right position, it is perhaps not surprising that their defence of first-past-the-post has taken on a rather desperate, existential quality. Indeed, research suggests that rightwing parties across all western countries appear to disproportionately benefit from first-past-the-post rules (Döring and Manow 2017).

It should be expected that politically-motivated, strongly partisan actors would offer up self-serving arguments about reform that shift depending on the changing political context. Academic participants, by contrast, are held to a different standard. They are expected to produce consistent, informed positions that define their terms clearly, expose unstated assumptions and bias, and utilize past scholarship and systematic new evidence to support their



claims. *Should We Change How We Vote? Evaluating Canada's Electoral System* is an edited collection that claims to meet these more rigorous academic standards. Editors Andrew Potter, Daniel Weinstock and Peter Loewen suggest their book aims to provide a “clear reckoning of the values at stake in the choice of electoral systems” because “[e]lectoral reform should occur with all relevant values in full view.” The editors are particularly concerned that a full appreciation of first-past-the-post’s strengths and weaknesses be explored and assessed e.g. a consideration of how well the current system scores on non-proportional values (Potter et al xvii). The volume is divided into four sections that contain contributions exploring the principles and values undergirding different voting systems, evidence of and experience with their general workings, issues and alternatives related to using different systems, and how to make decisions about changing from one system to another.

Contrasted with the previously discussed volumes, *Should We Change How We Vote?* can be considered a ‘liberal’ contribution to Canada’s voting system debate. It is small ‘l’ rather than capital ‘L’ – the contributors are not attempting to shore up the electoral prospects of any particular Liberal party via their interventions. Instead, it is liberal in the sense that contributors operate from a broadly ‘liberal’ set of assumptions about how the political world is structured and functions i.e. that the basic unit of society is the individual, the animating dynamic of society is plural competition for influence, and that part of this conflict plays out via a structured set of stable and transparent institutions and processes. These (usually unstated, sometimes unquestioned) assumptions undergird most research and reasoning in the academic study of Canadian politics, philosophy and law, and their impact extends to the kinds of questions that typically get asked and the sorts of things that count as evidence in making arguments. And, as with Conservative assumptions about politics, these liberal assumptions are contestable. If the world doesn’t appear to work in ‘liberal’ ways, arguments that presume it does may prove to be less than persuasive.

Assessing the book as a whole, it must be stated that the ambitious goals of *Should We Change How We Vote?* have not been met. The editors made a number of curious choices that limit the book’s persuasive force and depth. First, the volume is decidedly unbalanced on the question of whether reform is advisable or not. With eight of the book’s contributors opposed to reform and only three in favour (another six could be considered neutral on the question), a more accurate title for the collection would have been *We Should Not Change the Voting System*. Second, most of the contributors are not experts in the field. Not being an expert in the field itself is not necessarily a major problem – academics can always take up new topics – but when doing so they usually enter the discussions with a degree of circumspection, recognizing that a new academic field will have nuances that take time to appreciate. As will be set out in more detail below, those opposed to reform in this volume are all fairly new to the topic and appear to exercise little restraint in making broad, mostly unsubstantiated claims about voting systems. By contrast, the most balanced and nuanced contributions here come from scholars with the strongest background in the topic e.g. Carty, Cross, Archer, and Wagner and Gidengil. Ken Carty has published extensively on voting systems and was the Director of Research for the BC Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform. His chapter offers a snapshot of the provincial voting system reform efforts over the past decade and half and provides some of the only genuine

political analysis of the reform process in this volume i.e. he explores the political interests that have influenced the various provincial reform episodes. He rightly notes that the governing political parties in all cases were not committed to reform and not neutral in crafting the rules and processes for reform. William Cross examines the possible impact of a new voting system on the internal democracy of Canadian political parties by exploring how parties in countries that use other voting systems handle such internal decision-making. His chapter addresses an important concern by seeking out evidence rather than simply speculating in a vacuum. His efforts should have been the model for other contributors to this volume. These authors are also less interested in weighing in on the 'should' question than providing insights that might help people make up their own minds.

Aside from these few chapters, the other contributions suffer from a number of consistent and overlapping problems involving the use of 'ideal type' analysis, empty speculation, the tendency to mistake citing arguments for actually making them, and a refusal to engage seriously with opposing arguments. For instance, a host of authors here (e.g. Weinstock, McFarlane, Goodyear-Grant) draw on the now popular values arguments about voting systems i.e. that different voting systems represent different value trade-offs. The inference is that Canada's voting system was chosen and remains in place because it fulfills certain values while alternatives may be chosen when enough people prefer a different mix of values. This approach is a classic 'ideal type' argument in that it involves theorizing the purposes of institutions from what appear to be their regular functioning. The problem is that nowhere can it be demonstrated that any voting system has been introduced to accomplish said values. As the historical work on voting system change demonstrates, voting systems are not chosen on the basis of abstract values but instead are the product of concrete political struggles, usually involving serious policy disputes between left and right political actors (see Ahmed 2013; Pilon 2013). The contributors mistake an academic reification about voting systems (as to their purpose and origin) for the actual historical reasons voting systems exist where they do.

This mistake leads to some indefensible claims. For instance, in his chapter on electoral reform as a rights issue Emmett McFarlane charges that "advocates of PR engage in shallow and trite analytical reasoning where they rhetorically reframe the way FPP operates – indeed, is intended to operate based on the underlying principles it advances ...". More specifically he argues that critics assume proportionality as a key value and "employ dubious rhetoric about 'making votes count' or 'wasted votes' that simply do not treat majoritarian systems fairly on their own terms" (35). The problem with this reasoning is that voting systems do not have any unchanging or underlying principles that guide their workings. They are historical constructions that interact with a host of other political factors – their general workings are always historically contingent. As an example, first-past-the-post was seen to operate very differently before disciplined political parties came on the scene. And voting system are never judged 'on their own terms' but against political criteria that exists outside them. Voting systems are a means to accomplish something – in the present case that is the realization of 'democracy' as different people understand it. The debate then is about whether any particular voting system is actually doing the job. By McFarlane's logic, dictatorships could not be judged and found wanting

against a democratic criteria because as systems of rule they are not intended to be democratic.

The problem with 'ideal type' analysis is that it substitutes essentially 'made up stories' for an actual historical investigation into why things have turned out as they have, or offers speculation about possible outcomes instead of concrete comparative research. Not that all the 'made up stories' are necessarily bad. Deliberative democracy scholars Colin Macleod and Mark Warren each craft a compelling story in their respective chapters about how a more proportional voting system would likely contribute to deeper, more substantive democratic deliberation. I tend to agree with them. But readers who subscribe to nasty, brutish and short theories of society won't be convinced. Here these ideas would have been strengthened by recourse to research that would connect them to what actually goes on in PR-using countries. Facts can be inconvenient, sometimes forcing people to rethink their positions. The last three chapters of the book focusing on the process of voting system change are particularly weak for just this absence of factual, historical content. Despite a wealth of research on how voting systems actually have been changed in the real world, all three appear to prefer to simply work out their 'ideal' reform processes theoretically. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that such efforts have had much influence on real events (see Ahmed 2013; Pilon 2013).

It is disappointing for an academic collection that a number of contributions never really rise above reasserting the mainstream media's distorted and partial talking points about voting systems. In their chapters, Weinstock, Goodyear-Grant and Miljan all offer up familiar assertions about the lack of accountability, too much influence for small parties, and the problems of post-election bargaining between parties. All three speculate freely about any number of possibly terrible things that might occur with a new voting system – the exclusion of ethnocultural minorities, the representation of extremists, governing instability, etc. But after decades of debate on this topic in this country we should be beyond this kind of lazy fear-mongering. Such claims should be backed up by some effort at comparative research to assess just how likely the problem are to emerge. For instance, Weinstein, Goodyear-Grant and Miljan all assert that PR voting systems allow small parties to have too much influence in coalition-making. But is this true? Can this claim be borne out by examining what influence small parties have had in comparable countries using such systems over the past century? To speculate about possible problems but ignore potential sources of evidence that might test such claims is to advance the general discussion not one bit.

Other contributions never really engage with opposing views or only do so by distorting the debate. In his chapter on how "Electoral Reform Is Not a Rights Issue" Emmett McFarlane argues that attempts to dislodge Canada's first past the post voting system by arguing it violates the value of voter equality will fail because the courts have ruled that absolute voter equality can be abridged to achieve other competing representational goals (36-7). Indeed, he argues, the courts have already rejected an attempt to use this strategy in Quebec (39). Furthermore, citing just one op/ed I submitted to the *Ottawa Hill Times*, he argues that I am "unsuccessful at explaining why these values ought to be regarded as rights while the principles privileged by other electoral systems are not" (40). McFarlane's response is surprising in a

number of ways. For an expert on the courts, he should know that courts change their positions on issues, thus failure in one instance may precede success in another. He also fails to cite any of the specific factums or academic literature relating to court challenges to the voting system where he would have had to engage with just how such values arguments are made (even though he cites such work in his own earlier publications e.g. McFarlane 2016). Indeed, if he had consulted my factum for the Quebec court case or my book-length treatment of these and related issues in *The Politics of Voting: Reforming Canada's Voting System* he would know that I have addressed these issues in some detail (on the court's role, see particularly Pilon 2007, 104-5). Even his characterization of the courts' position on electoral boundaries misses crucial nuances. While the courts have allowed that values other than voter equality can come into play as concerns districting, they nonetheless privilege voter equality as a dominant value and argue that departures from voter equality need to be justified on the basis of pressing competing values (for the key passages from the various court decisions, see Knight 1999, 26-8). It is in this need to justify why votes are presently so unequal that the case for the changing the voting system rests.

The book does provide an interesting paired example of good and bad practice on the issue of diverse representation. In "The Electoral System and Parliament's Diversity Problem: In Defence of the Wrongly Accused," Erin Tolley argues that Canada's current voting system is not a barrier to increasing the representation of women or other under-represented groups. Indeed, she points to recent proportional or near proportional results for visible minorities and indigenous people in the last federal election as proof. Furthermore, she disagrees that proportional voting systems have consistently produced better results, arguing that "it is almost impossible to determine that the outcome is a function of voting rules" (112). As evidence, she notes that the use of PR has not led to increased female representation in "Poland, Israel, Ireland, Uruguay and Hungary" while Ethiopia has increased women's representation without it, providing "a counterpoint to the inaccurate claim that a proportional electoral formula is a necessary or even sufficient condition for more diverse elected bodies" (117). By contrast, Tolley says that improving the representation of diversity in Canada just requires parties that are normatively committed to that goal. Tolley ends by impugning the motives of PR campaigners who try to link their issue with better representation of diversity: "I am not convinced this commitment is sincere; if it were, the discussion of representation would be much more robust and far less simplistic" (123).

Tolley's chapter is practically a case study in how *not* to do comparative research on this issue. First, her key claims are based on straw arguments that no serious scholar on the issue would make. No one argues that first past the post is an *absolute* barrier to diverse representation or that normative commitments and political parties are irrelevant. The most influential research on diversity and voting systems highlights the interactive effects of social mobilization (e.g. through a women's movement), its impact on a political party or parties (typically progressive ones), and the role the voting system plays in creating a competitive environment between parties so that a kind of contagion effect can emerge where one party's leadership on diverse representation can influence others to make it a priority (for representative examples, see Matland and Studlar 1996; Caul 1999, and Matland 2005). Second, Tolley relies on work that

violates some of the basic rules about how to do comparison effectively (e.g. Roberts, Seawright and Cyr 2012). For instance, it is standard in making comparisons on this issue that the countries be broadly similar i.e. Canada and western Europe, not Canada and eastern Europe or Africa. Done properly, the main findings of the literature still stand i.e. proportional voting systems do respond more quickly to demands for diverse representation (e.g. Rosen 2013, 2017). Angelia Wagner and Elisabeth Gidengil offer a much more recognizable and balanced assessment of this literature in their chapter, "Addressing Representational Deficits in Canadian Legislatures." In the end, they allow that a different voting system could make a difference, but only if accompanied by serious efforts to challenge the economic and social inequalities that also hinder achieving diverse representation, the latter being perfectly reasonable caveats.

Meanwhile Tolley's defence of Canada's voting system – that it did finally manage to produce a roughly proportional representation of visible minorities and indigenous people in the 2015 federal election – ignores how long it took to achieve this outcome as well as the quality of the results. For instance, as first past the post systems tend to privilege geographically concentrated groups, Tolley argues that this means the system can work for indigenous people where they are regionally concentrated (typically northern and rural ridings). But this assumption ignores the fact that the majority of indigenous people in Canada actually live in urban areas where first past the post assures that their votes will be swamped by the dominant society (Statistics Canada 2017). Thus, taken as whole, first past the post has not served indigenous people in Canada very well. Melissa Williams makes a similar mistake in her chapter on indigenous people, over-focusing on geography while barely acknowledging the positive results that might come with a different voting system. Indeed, in a chapter that was supposed to focus on the voting system and indigenous representation, she simply sets that aside to talk about other, admittedly also important things. But this leaves both the less savoury aspects of the relationship between first past the post and indigenous communities (long ago highlighted by indigenous Senator Len Marchand) as well as the exciting gains in indigenous representation in New Zealand since switching to PR unexplored (Marchand 1990; Sparrow 2010; Pilon 2016).

In the end, it is Tolley's assertion that improving the representation of diversity only requires us to 'make the parties do it' that is simplistic. This assertion appears to assume that no one has tried 'make the parties do it' already. But the various political activists that have taken up voting system reform to further diverse representation are not unfamiliar with the challenges facing such candidates, often because they have spent years in political parties working to get them nominated and elected. Take Doris Anderson, a ground-breaking journalist, long-time Liberal party activist, and leading Canadian feminist. She was largely responsible for assuring that equality rights for women were added to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. She was also an early champion of voting system reform as means of improving the political representation of women. She turned to voting system reform not because she saw it as magic bullet or because she ignored the role the political parties play. She turned to it because she had spent decades trying to get the Liberal party to elect more women, with fairly slow and meagre results to show for her efforts. Her commitment to gaining more diverse representation through a lifetime of activism is beyond question (Anderson 1991; Speirs 2007).

The anchor chapter for the volume is arguably Peter Loewen's on "Democratic Stability, Representation, and Accountability: A Case for Single-Member Plurality Elections in Canada." Loewen strongly urges that Canada keep its traditional first past the post voting system for three reasons. First, he argues that it has contributed to the long running political stability of the country. Specifically, he claims that "Canadian representatives have been chosen by democratic means without interruption since Confederation in 1867" and that "[o]nly two countries have a longer record of democratic selection and peaceful transition," citing the UK since 1660 and the US since 1801 (24). If that seems to set the bar for judging democratic performance a bit low, Loewen warns that "[i]n a more permissive electoral system, we have good reason to believe that Canada would have fragmented into a large number of political parties making not only regional appeals but direct appeals to ethnicity or language" (26). Contra conventional academic wisdom, Loewen claims that first past the post actually helps stem the appeal of regional politics. Indeed, he argues that "[o]ur electoral system just might have something to do with the ability of our politics to avoid falling into fragmentation, regional grievances, and zero-sum national politics" (27). As for reform, Loewen argues that we can't know what effects changing the voting system might have and we can't draw on the experience of other countries because the institutional mix in every country is too unique. So the choice about change is "between slow evolution and exogenous shock." Loewen suggests "we should choose the latter only if we believe we are cleverer than evolution." His answer? "We are not" (27-8).

Loewen's second theme highlights the policy responsiveness of first past the post. Because the system tends to elect single party majority governments elected leaders can both act decisively on public wants or avoid them, as they see fit. The latter is defensible, he claims, on efficiency and equity grounds, citing unpopular policies like the GST and income trusts that were nonetheless 'good ideas' in his opinion. Here his point is that first past the post allows "for the manoeuvring room necessary to pursue fundamental policy reforms" (28-30). In other words, it allows government to resist public pressure on certain issues. Loewen's third concern focuses around what he calls the "severely limited capacities" of voters. Part of this is just human nature as "humans ... are as prone to conflict as they are to compromise and conciliation," part of it reflects that fact that voters are "far from the perfectly rational agents assumed in many models of politics." Indeed, he claims they are "most often uninformed about the details of politics and public policy," "make up their public opinions off the top of their heads," and are "seemingly no more capable of always making good choices than they are of resisting the worst hucksters and conmen." Given such limited abilities, Loewen argues, it is perfectly reasonable and advisable that the public face a restricted choice of options from which they can choose and first past the post tends to provide (30-31).

Loewen's arguments are breathtaking in their almost complete disavowal of the usual justifications for modern political institutions, namely that they should embody explicitly 'democratic' values. By Loewen's account, first past the post's 'democracy' works precisely because it has so little actual democratic substance. The problems with his analysis begin in the past where his claims about pre-20<sup>th</sup> century democracy in Anglo-American countries mistake

what were liberal governing orders with democratic ones. 1660, 1801 and 1867 were not democratic moments for the UK, US or Canada by any stretch of the imagination, as any basic perusal of historic events and their contemporary political debates makes clear (for a detailed historical treatment of these distinctions, see Pilon 2013, 2017b and 2018). Canada's voting system (and the broader electoral system of which it was a part) was entrenched by a pre-democratic political elite and served to privilege their dominance long into the future, even as the system became more democratic into the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Ward 1951; Pilon 2017b). From there Loewen make claims about voting system effects that are almost entirely speculative. He claims that a different voting system might have negatively affected the development of Canadian politics, leading to fragmentation and conflict. But two Canadian provinces actually used proportional voting to elect members from their major cities for three and half decades and did not produce the problematic results Loewen claims to fear (Jansen 1998; Pilon 2006; Jansen 2004). Loewen's assertions about regionalism and our voting system ignore both the relevant academic literature and Canadian political reality. Compare Loewen's glib declarations with Alan Cairns still seminal and painstaking 1968 analysis of just how Canada's first past the post voting system has routinely encouraged regional parties and the regional polarization of aspiring national parties over Canada's first century, often in ways that defied what voters said with their votes (Cairns 1968). His analysis has only been further confirmed by subsequent events and scholarship (Jansen and Siaroff 2004). Loewen's views on electoral reform are not persuasive either. There are remarkable similarities in the reform processes across western countries in different historic eras that could provide insights for Canada (reviewed in detail in Pilon 2006, 2013). Invoking 'evolution' to defend the status quo and resist change is just intellectually weak. Funny how reforms in the past are 'evolution' but reforms today are not.

Loewen's second and third arguments supporting first past the post really amount to arguments against democracy itself. Suggesting that governments need the freedom to ignore what the public wants leaves who, precisely, in charge of deciding what is best for society? Experts? Elites? Political science professors? Then justifying elite rule by recourse to research that claims voters are ignorant and unable to reason effectively reproduces almost exactly late nineteenth century liberal rationales against extending the vote to most of the general public in the first place (on the anti-democratic thrust of nineteenth century liberalism, see Losurdo 2014). Curiously, Loewen cites Arthur Lupia's book *Uninformed* to back his claims that voters are poorly informed, even though Lupia argues that voter ignorance is routinely over-estimated by political scientists due to flawed approaches to measurement, a finding supported by other research (for instance, Gibson and Caldeira 2009). Contrary to Loewen's dire view, Lupia argues in a number of publications that voters can become informed or adapt to low information situations to reason effectively through a host of means (see particularly Lupia and McCubbins 1998 and Lupia 2016). Loewen is basically peddling an elitist, upper middle class view of political participation that privileges deep policy knowledge as a precondition for entering the discussion. But as Lupia argues, nobody – not even political science professors – can satisfy such exalted criteria across the full range of topics taken up by politicians. The sheer volume of detail brought to bear in contemporary legislative politics means that everyone is broadly ignorant to a greater or lesser degree. Voters cope with this by utilizing information short-cuts and proxies

e.g. looking to political parties, public interest groups, media, and social networks they trust for direction. And contrary to Loewen's insinuations, there's nothing wrong with that.

Overall, *Should We Change How We Vote* bears the marks of its rushed production. Keen to produce an academic text that could weigh in on the national voting system debate sponsored by Trudeau Liberals before the government made any final decisions, the editors decided to publish papers from two conferences "largely as they were delivered" rather than have participants "rewrite their papers ... in full academic regalia" (Potter et al xvi). In the end, such haste proved to be for naught when Trudeau broke his promise to change the voting system in early 2017, before the book was even published. Still, the editors claim that when the issue returns for public consideration, their volume will "contribute to righting the focus" of the debate (Potter et al xviii). Given the weakness of so many contributions here, that seems highly unlikely. To advance the discussion of the voting system reform debate in Canada would have required these contributors to actually engage the relevant academic literatures and their opponents' arguments. Nowhere in the book does anyone seriously take up or even acknowledge most of the past academic contributions on the subject as they relate to Canada e.g. Alan Cairns work on regionalism and first past the post, the recommendations for a parallel mixed-member voting system from the Pepin-Robarts Task Force on Canadian Unity, William Irvine's recommendations for a form of MMP for Canada in his monograph *Does Canada Need a New Voting System*, the suggestions of the Macdonald Commission to use STV for elections to the Senate, or more recent contributions from Henry Milner, the Law Commission of Canada, the Citizens' Assembly reports from BC and Ontario, and Jean-Pierre Derriennic, let alone any of my own publications on the subject. These volumes take up and respond to, often in detail, most of the tossed off, speculative fears and concerns that are aired here. Nor does any contributor really seriously engage with the arguments for a new voting system as they are being made right now. One might have thought that even critics could admit that there might be some positive things that could result from change, even if, on balance, they thought the trade-offs did not merit embracing reform. Meanwhile the broad case for reform itself doesn't even merit a chapter of its own in the collection. The fact that the book claims to evaluate whether Canada should change its voting system but fails to effectively present one side of the debate on its own terms says a great deal about its editors' commitment to a fair and balanced treatment of the issue.

To be fair, many of the problems with *Should We Change How We Vote* hardly differ from a host of other work rooted in liberal ontology and methodology, particularly an unwillingness to take history seriously and come to grips with historical impacts over time. Because most of these authors are uncritical about where Canadian political institutions have come from or who they have served, they fail to appreciate how power struggles and inequality are manifest in their origins and reproduction. Such liberal blindspots lead Emmett McFarlane to rail against reformers who try to use the courts to change the voting system because it is "undemocratic to presume that the most fundamental link between state and society should be determined in any other manner than political deliberation and clear consensus" (41). This assertion ignores first past the post's undemocratic origins in Canada and how those who controlled setting the rules in that undemocratic period gained distinct advantages over those who came later



(reviewed in detail in Pilon 2017b). Concerned only for procedural fairness now, such liberals ignore how unfairness in the past has contributed to who has power and influence today. As liberals, it is perhaps not surprising that there is a whiggish feel to the kind of history that appears here, that what has come to pass – the policies we have adopted, the institutions that we use – must be what the public want, with little appreciation of how structured power and inequality enter into the process. As McFarlane says, reformers have failed in the political arena because they have “been unable to succeed in convincing a majority of their fellow citizens that the existing system is flawed” (40-1). Such simplistic characterizations of political struggle ignore the organized power of vested interests – the dominant political parties, the corporate media, well-financed right-wing think tanks, etc. – as well as historical and contemporary evidence about how reform actually occurs. As the historical work on the contested origins of ‘actually existing voting systems’ demonstrates, reform is never a matter of fair and balanced political deliberation over equally democratic ideal values but more typically a highly unequal struggle for and against democracy itself (see Pilon 2013, 2017a, 2017b, 2018).

Despite efforts to cast their claims in broad comparative terms, these recent attempts to defend first past the post in Canada by both Conservatives and liberals rarely rise above an insular nativism and political self-interest. On the whole that doesn’t really matter to the various contributors because the point of such interventions is political: for Conservatives, to protect and advance their party, for liberals, to protect a governing system that tends to limit public influence to a choice between two acceptably ‘liberal’ parties. If the arguments defending first past the post here seem weak it is because the authors are saying things that they and their audiences already believe to be true. We see this approach again and again across these volumes as author after author cite arguments that they claim support their views rather than actually making the arguments themselves. Whether claiming that vote totals under first past the post can’t be added up across the country, or asserting that first past the post scores high on accountability, or lauding the value of so-called ‘big tent’ parties, authors tend to tell, not show, which any scholar should know is a weak form of argument. Indeed, it’s not really an arguing at all.

Take the claim that vote totals for political parties competing in a first past the post voting system cannot be tallied across the country as a whole. Both Smith and McFarlane make this claim with rhetorical flourish but neither actually sets out just why this is case. On the face of it, if true, it could be one of the strongest arguments against the often moralistic claims made by reformers that political parties are misrepresented and that countless votes are ‘wasted’ under first past the post. Reformers argue that national vote totals for parties do not match their proportions of the popular vote and that they should. Defenders of first past the post need to argue that such totals are meaningless because the dynamics of the voting system mean that votes only make sense in relation to the other votes cast in particular riding. They have to argue, and support with evidence, that voters are more influenced by what is going on in the local riding than at the national level. This would involve demonstrating that voters consider individuals as well as party label in making their vote choice, and/or that strategic factors about which parties are most competitive in any given riding may move voters to switch their vote. There is some academic evidence that supports the view that local factors do influence the vote

for different local candidates, though it tends to show simply that money spent locally will raise the profile of the party in that locale, making it appear more competitive, not that local political factors determine the vote (Carty and Eagles 2005). Thus, on the whole, both academic evidence and a common sense reading of election results tends to weaken the local vote argument decisively. First, academic work on how voters make choices in elections underlines the key role of political parties. Nearly everyone uses party label to help them make their choice (Morgenstern and Swindle 2005; Budge et al 2010). Even when voters claim to be support a local candidate, this is most often a post hoc rationalization to accept their party's choice (Blais et al 2003). Second, non-party candidates rarely get elected provincially or nationally, and when they do, they are usually former party MPs involved in a high profile dispute with their party. Third, national polling just before election day regularly comes very close to the proportions of the vote cast for different parties across the country, reinforcing the view that party is primarily what people are voting for, regardless of local constituency circumstances or the attributes of local candidates.

Another argument that anti-reformers tend to cite but not actually make in any detail is the idea that first past the post delivers greater accountability to voters than other voting systems. Only first past the post, we are told, allows voter to 'throw the bums out' and thus hold governments directly accountable for their policy decisions. Pepall, Smith, Loewen and Goodyear-Grant all lean heavily on this assertion as a major reason to retain first past the post in Canada, though none provide any detail on just how this accountability should be understood to actually work. The lack of clarify is perhaps not surprising as scholars studying the use of concepts and discourse have noted the rapid rise of 'accountability' as a kind of cultural keyword over the past few decades, in part because the term combines both moral weight with deep ambiguity about its practical application (Dubnick 2014). In its historical usage, it referred to someone answering for their actions to another, to literally 'account' for or explain them. In applying this to voting systems then, we have to ask who is answering to whom for their actions? As most governments in Canada are elected by a minority of voters, it should be noted that the majority of voters seldom authorize the government of the day to act in the first place. For most supporters of first past the post, this doesn't matter. The main thing is that voters know who to hold responsible for acting – the single party majority government. But what can voters do to make the government accountable? Only defeat them and replace them with another government. While the logic of this is clear the argument falls afoul of political reality. It assumes a kind of non-partisan approach to the choice of government that belies the actual left-right organization of voters in real elections. Thus the promoted accountability in first past the post is largely a chimera because right-wing voters are hardly going to vote left to make 'their' government accountable, and vice versa. For accountability to be meaningful voters would need to be able to make their chosen party accountable by supporting a different party with similar, not completely different, goals. Ironically for first past the post supporters, this is actually what proportional voting systems allow and facilitate, if voters want it.

Another assertion in both the academic and public debates is that 'big tent' parties are good and thus first past the post is a good voting system because it 'encourages' their development.

Indeed, this was just the argument utilized by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to justify breaking his promise to change the voting system and scuttling his government's reform process. Trudeau argued that Canada's traditional big tent parties were the best defence against extremism and political fragmentation. Except that Canada has witnessed plenty of extremism at the hands of both national Liberal and Conservative big tent parties over the course of our history, against indigenous peoples, people of colour, ethnic minorities, activists and supporters of left-wing parties and movements, etc. What first past the post did do was limit the impact of more socially progressive voices like the national CCF and NDP, whose consistent national under-representation limited their ability to mitigate such extremism (for instance, on questions of re-enfranchising Canadians of Asian descent). By contrast, proportional voting systems might allow 'extremists' to gain election but they do not over-represent them. Academic work on such parties in western Europe suggests that they come and go, usually because most other parties refuse to work with them unless they temper their 'extreme' policy demands (Carter 2002; Ladner 2014).

Defences of first past the post that highlight the positive role of dominant parties as vehicles for social cohesion and inclusion, as well as policy development and prioritization, seldom recognize how such groups may be unduly influenced by powerful groups in civil society. With few dominant 'big tent' parties, usually two, the costs of capture to the powerful are less than if competition threatens to allow new groups to emerge. Restrained group competition benefits the best resourced who can then control those vehicles, define them, and block entry by others. Indeed, this type of constrained competition is why Kenneth Arrow, far from endorsing first past the post, argued against its continued use in western democracies because "[t]he plurality system chokes off free entry" (Hamlin 2012). More competitive systems offer more chances for less powerful groups to organize and compete collectively and make it harder for financially powerful forces to dominate everything. Another factor that goes unremarked in defences of first past the post is the social engineering that results from restricting political competition. As parties play a key role in not just reflecting but shaping identity, structures that limit party competition also limit identity formation. The preference for brokerage, catch-all parties obscures how such parties diminish or make invisible certain aspects of social reality, while privileging others. Naturally liberals and conservatives seek unity in parties that weaken the ability of challengers to form coherent alternative poles of organized politics. They present a sanitized view of social unity that can then be judged on its technocratic ability to 'manage' government affairs, rather than on its ideological agenda to help some and hurt others. Thus the embedded non-partisan and anti-political bias of first past the post is converted into its strength.

Recognizing these power inequalities as they manifest through political organizations also reveals that a big part of the 'let the voters decide' rhetoric is really about leaving the politicians – and their funders – to decide just about everything. As individual voters cannot realistically influence let alone control the agenda or the balance of emphasis put on issues, just about all decisions will devolve to the political leadership. It is to maintain maximum power over this defining role that corporate-financed parties and media resist changes to the electoral system so strongly (Pilon 2013). Defenders of first past the post say that voters get accountability

because they 'decide' who governs, but the public can only choose between heavily vetted choices influenced by the most powerful groups in society. Millions of dollars are spent on polling and advertising not to inform the public, but to control their perceptions of what is possible politically in an attempt to make these choices appear inevitable. By contrast, conventional political elites fear that a proportional voting system will allow forces outside their control to enter and influence what goes on. Ultimately, defences of first past the post draw on exclusionary and liberal theories of society, rather than solidaristic and egalitarian ones. The rhetorical arguments focus on the unfair role of outsiders in forcing their issues on dominant groups, unlike solidaristic approaches that highlight inclusion and the process by which outsiders and weaker elements of society are brought into winning coalitions.

In the end, the democratic case for the continued use or past benefits of first past the post remains to be made. To be fair, it should be recognized that it is a hard case to make. It is hard because democratic institutions have to be judged by the extent to which they facilitate recognizably democratic values and outcomes. Most of the contributors to the volumes reviewed here would have us believe that a voting system that routinely allows a minority to dominate the majority, that fails to represent significant minority views (unless they are geographically concentrated), that leaves half the voters with no representation, and that suppresses political competition is better than one that regularly produces governments that do represent a majority of voters, that can effectively represent minority views, that turns most of the votes cast into representation, and creates a competitive political dynamic that gives voters choices that are closer to their ideological preferences. They basically argue in favour of a restricted market, one that tries to force voters to choose one of two so-called 'big tent' parties with the threat that their vote will just be thrown away if they try to support so-called 'fringe parties.' And they eschew policy cooperation across parties as somehow undemocratic. Only ideologues can somehow make 'democratic' such patently undemocratic assertions.

Contemporary defences of first past the post in Canada implicitly rely on the notion of a 'democratic leviathan' in the form of a strong, single party legislative majority government that can rule unhindered while it remains in office. And therein lies the weakness of their case, from a democratic point of view. The whole notion of a 'democratic leviathan' is a misnomer because it is obviously a contradiction in terms. Hobbes viewed human social relations as one-dimensionally conflict-oriented, tending to be 'nasty, brutish and short.' For him, the only thing that could raise humanity out of its violent and chaotic state of nature was a social contract that put everyone under the control of an indivisible ruler, a monarch. Times changed but Hobbesian opposition to the very possibility of democracy in human affairs remained a constant theme of anti-democrats over the next centuries (Apperly 1999). Today there are liberals who bemoan Hobbes and conservatives who positively celebrate him but both subscribe to his views and, importantly, endorse the limits to governing that they entail. Yet it is just such limits that contemporary democratic reformers are contesting and their critics refuse to take seriously. The books reviewed here purport to add intellectual and evidentiary weight to this broader reform debate – but they do not.

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