

Not just “math is difficult”

Ted Morton implicitly suggests in the Calgary Herald on May 12, 2015 that the Alberta election result was somehow unfair, since the NDP secured 61% of the seats with 41% of the vote, whereas a combined Wildrose/PC vote of 52% secured only 35 seats. The sub-text being that a “combined” right-wing single party would have won the election. Similarly, the Labour Party and the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in the UK complain that roughly the same popular vote translated into 56 seats for the Scottish National Party (SNP), but only one seat for UKIP in the UK election of May 7. Also, the current Conservative Government in Canada has a very small proportion of the voting public supporting it, but this has delivered a majority government for the Conservatives. We can go on forever in the vein of this style of math.

In almost any election in any province in Canada, or at the federal level, the so-called “first-past-the-post” system delivers what is claimed by many to be anomalous results, calling for electoral reform through some proportional representational system. That is, popular vote percentages at elections rarely translate into what appear to be fair outcomes in terms of seat distribution, especially when more than two parties are competing for seats. The introduction of regional voting blocks makes this even worse. Thus, it is often argued, a proportional representation system would yield more balance in the seats allocated to the various parties, since each party’s proportion of the popular vote would translate into a comparable proportion of seats won. On the other hand, however, proportional representation voting systems often translate into minority government situations, or routine government instability, when no one party can obtain sufficient seats to pursue a coherent legislative programme.

The frequent inability of proportional representation systems to deliver stable governments is often an argument used by incumbent governments to leave a first-past-the-post system in place. In addition, of course, some argue that the NDP in Alberta and the Conservatives in Ottawa are current beneficiaries of the first-past-the-post system, notwithstanding having railed against it when in opposition. When parties take power, however, they are typically less inclined to change the electoral system when they are seemingly benefitting from it.

One should, however, look beyond the math in the apparently anomalous results seen in the Alberta and UK elections. The suggestion we have been hearing a lot for the past week in Alberta is that the election result was somehow unfair (even although the previous Alberta government of forty-four years benefitted significantly in the same way from the first-past-the-post system). This “unfairness”, however, assumes that all voters would suddenly vote for a single, combined party, if a right or left wing coalition was formed into one party. “Unite the right”; or “unite the left”, as the saying goes. What such an observation fails to appreciate, however, is that how the electorate votes is very much dependent on the slate of options before it, and also that considerable strategic voting goes on in a first-past-the-post system, when more than two options are being presented to voters. Experiments by Tversky and Kahneman (the developers of prospect

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theory, resulting in the award of a Nobel Prize) have shown that individuals’ decisions very much depend on the choice set before them. When you aggregate these decisions to the level of the whole electorate, and throw in various measures of discontent and partisanship, things become even more complicated.

Thus, while it is comforting for some to assert that “if only” certain coalitions had existed (or not existed), an outcome would have been different, this is more wishful thinking than a truly viable likelihood. A different outcome cannot be extrapolated from any given set of results, because the choice set offered to voters, and their responses to that choice set, are fundamentally tied to the choice set itself.

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