What the Canadian election results would have looked like with electoral reform

By MATTHEW HAYES

Canada’s 2019 national election results.

The 2019 federal election results suggested a majority of Canadians preferred a minority government, but the one they got was different than the one they voted for.

The Liberal Party won what can be described as a “stable minority” with barely a third of the total votes while the NDP and Greens elected far fewer MPs than their share of the vote. As a result, the first-past-the-post electoral system distorted the electoral preferences of Canadians.

Canada pays a price for this distortion. Not only is it the will of the people not reflected in our Parliament, but certain regions – such as Alberta, where 30 per cent of the population didn’t vote Conservative – will not be represented in government at all. In a proportional representation (PR) electoral system, the Liberals would have won 10 seats in the three Prairie provinces, and the NDP as many as nine.

The distortions in our voting system produce apathy among some voters. No doubt, there are other reasons why people don’t vote, but one is that they don’t feel that their vote will make any difference. In a first-past-the-post system, if you are an NDP voter in a riding where the overall NDP vote is marginal (say, less than 10 per cent), you may feel like voting doesn’t count for much.

The current electoral system also incentivizes “strategic voting,” especially on the political left, in order to prevent a Conservative Party breakthrough. This too is part of our voting system’s distortions.

The voting results in 2019 using the first-past-the-post system distorted the Liberal vote across much of the country. If we calculated the vote by national voter turnout, results from the election would look very different.

Supposing a five per cent cut-off for parties to be represented in the House of Commons, the seats totals using the seat totals using the total national vote would look like something close to that found on the middle graph.

In this scenario, eight remaining seats representing just over two per cent of the population who voted for other parties would have to be apportioned to the main parties, using an agreed-upon formula to make fractional numbers into whole seats. The numbers in the chart above round each party’s seat total to the nearest whole seat, but that leaves several parties with over- and under-votes that are fractional and not representative.

There are several formulas for resolving this, the most widely used is the D’Hondt method.

Regional differences

In Canada, one could reasonably object that a national proportional representation system would distort regional differences. This might dilute strong regional parties, most obviously the Bloc Québécois, but possibly also the Conservatives, whose Western power base would be diluted by weaker support elsewhere.

Taking the election results and breaking them down by region that would retain the same number of regional seats chosen proportionally (Atlantic Canada 32; Quebec 78; Ontario 121; Prairies 62; BC 42; the North 3), the results would look something like that depicted on the right graph.

That would mean re-portioning about 34 other seats, five of which represent Green votes in Quebec and on the Prairies, where the Greens would have failed to make the five per cent cut-off for representation (they would have made a three per cent cut off in both regions).

Lower Conservative numbers in the Prairies are made up through higher representation in the Maritimes and Quebec, where the Conservative Party would draw part of its caucus, giving it a much more national base.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s announcement that he will govern without a coalition partner, and therefore not have to compromise with any other parties, is precisely what Canadians voted against when they elected a minority Parliament.

With a proportional representation electoral system, Parliament would require a lot more cooperation among major parties to pass legislation and stave off confidence votes. This could also make Parliament more stable and less divisive.

Electing MPs to reflect our values

As the outgoing prime minister, Trudeau would still have had the right to try to form a coalition government, but his options would have been more limited. The NDP would have had a much stronger voice, technically able to govern with either the Conservatives or Liberals.

A slightly different vote, however, might have produced a Parliament where more than two parties would have had to work together. It would have also limited the overall size of the Bloc Québécois without completely sidelining them or Quebec representatives in any governing coalition.

Minority parlaments require the large national parties to cooperate in order to turn electoral success into parliamentary influence—a feature singularly missing from our current first-past-the-post system. Parliamentary leaders best able to be diplomatic and create relationships across party lines would be the true power brokers—not the PMO alone—of the new parliamentary system.

There are other advantages to moving to proportional representation. The use of party lists would make it easier for parties to represent women, ethnic minorities and other under-represented groups. It would also enable them to draw MPs from a deeper talent pool, more representative of a party’s national support.

Rather than distorting our vote, we might be able to elect parliaments that reflect who we are.

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The Sisson Mine shakedown: The myth of a mine to save New Brunswick

By LAWRENCE WUEST

The story of the Sisson Mine development starts dramatically. As it unfolds it includes promises of riches and jobs, demonstrations of government incompetence, lax regulatory oversight, fierce resistance by Indigenous and settler community allies and the backstory of a longstanding myth. The story ending promises to be spectacular: a possible shakedown by mining corporations for hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars.

In the beginning: promises, promises

The tungsten-molybdenum galloph, better known as the Sisson Brook Open-Pit Mine, burst onto the New Brunswick scene in 2008. In that year, Geodex Minerals tabled a detailed proposal for a massive open-pit mine at Sisson Brook on the headwaters of the Upper Nashwaak Watershed, 100 km northwest of Fredericton. Rights to the Sisson property were subsequently sold to Northcuff Resources in 2010.

Geodex Minerals and Northcuff Resources are exploratory mining companies. For more than 12 years, the Sisson proposal has monopolized the energy and resources of the province of New Brunswick. Over that time, successive governments have displayed not only a lack of economic understanding, but also a lack of appreciation of the murky world of mining exploration.

From the start, it was apparent that much maneuvering had gone on behind the scenes. Geodex suddenly emerged with extensive but incomplete environmental studies. Their economic pre-feasibility study appeared to show that in light of a once-in-a-lifetime spike in metal prices, an open-pit molybdenum and tungsten mine at Sisson Brook could be marginally profitable for at least a short time.

Geodex promised that, with enough tungsten, thinly distributed in a massive deposit of Paleozoic rock, one of the largest deposits of tungsten in the world by waiting for New Brunswick to start digging and piling on a scale that would be visible from space.

If all went smoothly, and if all the obstacles evaporated, New Brunswick could one day be a prime source and shaker in the rare metals market for years to come. The Geodex promises included 800 jobs during two years of construction, accompanied by $569 million in investment flowing through the New Brunswick economy. They also forecast 300 to 500 long-term mining jobs for 27 years as the crown jeweling for government buy-in.

However, the devil was in the details and no provincial or federal government department had either the will or expertise to critically examine the Geodex proposal. Quite the opposite: mining engineers in the province’s Department of Natural Resources and Energy embraced the concept enthusiastically. The province had not had a successful mine startup in many years.

The backstory: the myth of a mine that will save New Brunswick

What can explain the lack of critical analysis of the Sisson Mine proposal? The answer is in a longstanding myth that a major mine could save the New Brunswick economy. The myth

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Signs against the proposed gypsum mine are going up in and around rural Upham. Photo by Sarah Bensimons

people resisting a J.D. Irving-owned gypsum mine near the Hammond River Holdings Ltd. in Saint John, as late October, when the New Brunswick government gave approval to extract 2.5 million tons a year of gypsum rock, a material used for cement, found on Kedican Ridge in Upham. This decision was upset by the government’s lack of attention to how the mine could affect their well water and roads.

Hammond River Holdings Ltd. wants to extract 2.5 million tons of gypsum a year in Upham and ship it to Saint John via rail. "We do not approve of this project. We do not approve of the mining company of Northcliff Resources making a profitable business out of our community. We do not want to have 35 trucks a day driving on public roads from 35 or more huge trucks daily on public roads, is too much of a price to pay for another Irving enterprise that will only bring a few jobs for 10 years," says Bensimon.

Kuyek, a co-founder of MiningWatch Canada, was in New Brunswick in May and in October in Saint John travelling on puck on public property, which is illegal. "Our county has no water management plan or groundwater survey has been presented, yet Environment Minister Jeff Carr has signed the approval. The permit is presented in the Certificate of Approval are not acceptable to the community, particularly Condition 15, which puts the onus of proof on the community, but places the onus of negative impacts on well quality or quantity, says Bensimon.

Besides traffic management and noise, other conditions are the document concern wetland and watercourse management.

Blenis is behind the public Facebook page, Protect Upham Mountain, and has been running a citizen water monitoring program for a year. She expects to protect Upham’s water was recently recognized with an award for community leadership from the Conservation Council of New Brunswick at its 50th Anniversary Gala on Oct. 12.

According to mining expert Joan Kuyek, "The threat posed by the Upham Mine to the Hammond River, and to people already traveling on puck public property, is of grave concern. If Saint John, the Hammond River Angling Association has expressed concerns about the impact of the mine on roads, the Atlantic Walloon, also owned by J.D. Irving, in Saint John. The government’s approval comes with 29 conditions that limit the mining activities associated with the Upham gypsum mine to the Upham mine project on roads she says are already dangerous.

Cheryl Johnson, a teacher and member of the group Friends of the Upham gypsum mine proposal is just another "example of an entrenchment history of industrial capture of New Brunswick's landscape," according to Lawrence Wuest, a prominent critic of the project on roads she says are already dangerous.

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