

## INTRODUCTION

A book auditing Canada's electoral system could be one of two kinds. It could be devoted largely, or even entirely, to an examination of our method of voting - the **plurality vote**. As "electoral system" is a term often used synonymously with "method of voting" such a book would seem at first glance to make a good deal of sense. Alternatively, the book could be more wide-ranging in its purpose and topics. It could explore all the principal components of the electoral system: not only plurality voting but also the franchise, electoral districting, voter registration, and electoral management. I call these the five pillars or building blocks of democratic elections in Canada.

It strikes me that a more wide-ranging book is preferable to one focusing exclusively on the method of election, for two reasons. First, there is already a considerable literature on the plurality vote in Canada. With few exceptions it follows a standard pattern: an account of the strengths and weaknesses of plurality voting is followed by a call to reform the method of election. Not much would be gained by writing another book along these lines. Major works on the topic of Canadian electoral reform are listed in the Additional Reading section. Second, the question underlying the Canadian Democratic Audit series amounts to this: what is the state of democracy in Canada? So far as Canada's electoral system is concerned, I believe there is just one way to try to answer that question. An audit must examine the five essential parts of federal, provincial, and territorial elections in this country.

In the final analysis, I conclude that four of the five components (the franchise, electoral districting, voter registration, and election management) have changed immeasurably from the time of Confederation and that without exception these changes have vastly improved the way elections are conducted in Canada. Collectively they place Canada at the forefront of democratic nations. The building block that has remained unchanged since Confederation is, of course,

our plurality vote system. Plurality voting has become once again the subject of controversy and is now the focus of Canada's electoral reform movement. The contrasting history of the four building blocks, on the one hand, and the method of voting, on the other, raises a question at the heart of the Democratic Audit exercise: why are some institutions and institutional arrangements amenable to change and others not?

In the answer to that question lies an important clue as to why our plurality vote system has operated unaltered for more than 135 years. By definition methods of election are different from, let us say, who gets to vote or how elections are managed, for they are intimately intertwined with governance, representation, and the party system. They are a part of how parties, candidates, leaders, and voters connect at election time. To account for the strengths and weaknesses of plurality voting and call for a change in the system is relatively easy in isolation from the representational, governmental, and, possibly, constitutional consequences of changing methods of election. In contrast, this book raises questions that generally do not constitute part of the conventional wisdom about electoral reform, questions based on the view that at the core of our method of election there lies a complex relationship among plurality voting, party politics, and parliamentary representation. Readers, in turn, are left at the end of the exercise to judge for themselves how best to answer the call to replace our plurality vote.

My own view, which I would be the first to acknowledge is not shared by all my colleagues in Canada's political science community, is that caution is in order. It is not hard, as we shall see in Chapter 6, to find fault with plurality voting. The far more difficult part of the exercise comes in addressing two pressing questions: what kinds of reform should be implemented, and what are the likely consequences of the change? So far as the first of these questions is concerned, there is no agreement to date on an electoral method that would be better than the current one. With respect to the second, in many ways more troubling, question, we are far from understanding the impact of a

move away from plurality voting on our representational practices, party system, and governance. With careful forethought, political institutions such as voting systems can be changed. But the fallout from those changes cannot be foretold with any great accuracy, and the expected benefits to be derived from a change do not always materialize.

This book was in its final stages at the Press when the Progressive Conservative and Alliance parties merged in late 2003. The merger, in effect, acknowledges that plurality elections offer an inducement to opposition parties garnering comparable shares of voter support and occupying roughly similar ideological space to join forces rather than to continue to compete with one another. By contrast, there is less incentive for parties to merge in proportional electoral systems, in which, over a series of elections, parties are more likely to strive to preserve their distinctive identity and to try to maintain the loyalty of their respective electoral clientele.