ELECTORAL REFORM

Elections in Saskatchewan are based on what is called the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system. Under FPTP, the candidate with the most votes in each constituency becomes the MLA for that constituency.

For example, consider the results of this hypothetical three-way race in a constituency:

> Candidate A: 37% of the votes

> Candidate B: 35% of the votes

> Candidate C: 28% of the votes

Candidate A is elected and will take a seat in the legislature.

In a general election, this voting process happens in every constituency across the province. The party with the most winning candidates across the province will usually form the government.

A problem with the first-past-the-post system is that the number of seats each party takes in the legislature does not reflect the number of votes each party receives across the province.

To better understand the discrepancy between votes cast and seats gained, look at the results from the 2020 provincial election. Compare the percentage of seats each party won to their percentage of the popular vote:

Party	Popular Vote	# of Seats Won under FPTP	% of Seats Won under FPTP
Saskatchewan Party	60.67%	48	79%
New Democratic	31.59%	13	21%
Buffalo	2.54%	0	0%
Green	2.25%	0	0%
Progressive Conservative	1.89%	0	0%
Independent	0.24%	0	0%
Liberal	0.08%	0	0%

The Saskatchewan Party won 79% of the seats with 61% of the vote. Meanwhile, people who voted for other parties were under-represented in the legislature, if they were represented at all.

In Saskatchewan, first-past-the-post elections almost always put the party with the most votes into government. However, FPTP has once ended in government by the second-place party. In 1986, the NDP won the popular vote but the Progressive Conservatives won the most seats and formed government. Somewhat differently, in 1999, the Saskatchewan Party won the popular vote but the NDP won the most seats. To form a majority government, the NDP formed a coalition with the third-place Liberals. Together, the NDP and Liberal vote accounted for 59% of the popular vote.

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Many people have advocated for electoral reforms to remedy the perceived problems of first-past-the-post elections.

One proposed reform is proportional representation (PR). There are several types of PR, but they all have one common goal: parties are given seats based on their popular vote. For example, if Party A receives 55% of the vote and Party B receives 45% of the vote, Party A is granted 55% of the legislature's seats and Party B is granted 45% of the legislature's seats. This more accurately reflects voter intentions on a province-wide basis.

A different proposed reform is run-off voting. There are several types of run-off voting, but they all have one common goal. In run-off voting systems, a candidate must receive 50% or more of the vote to take a seat in the legislature. When votes are counted, if no candidate receives 50% of the vote, the bottom candidate is dropped off the ballot and a run-off process begins: sometimes the run-off process is a new election with fewer candidates. Other times the run-off process is accomplished by having voters mark in their second choice: when the bottom candidate is dropped off the ballot, the second choice of their supporters is counted.

The run-off process continues until a single candidate has 50% or more of the votes. Unlike PR, run-off systems tend to favour larger parties.

Discuss

1. Is first-past-the-post a fair way to choose a government? Explain.

2. Currently, we vote for individual candidates at the constituency level. The winner is expected to represent all their constituents in the legislature, whether or not they voted for them. Does this fact make proportional representation less important?

3. Would you be more inclined to vote for a smaller party if you thought your vote would have a higher likelihood of electing somebody, even if it wasn't your local candidate?

ACTIVITY