REASONS FOR 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 result of this hypothetical three-way race:

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 2016 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	62.40%	51	84%
New Democratic	30.20%	10	16%
Liberal	3.60%	0	0%
Green	1.80%	0	0%
Progressive Conservative	1.30%	0	0%
Western Independence	0.10%	0	0%

The Saskatchewan Party won 84% of the seats in the legislature with 64% of the votes. 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 government, the NDP agreed to a coalition with the third-place Liberals.

ELECTORAL REFORM

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 provincial voter intentions.

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. 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. Would you be more inclined to vote for a smaller party if you thought your vote would have a higher likelihood of electing somebody?

ACTIVITY