

Plumping the Municipal Election

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Monday, November 10, 2008

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There is no grand prevailing wisdom about how people should vote. It's hard enough to get people to show up at the polls as it is--and for many good reasons. But once people show up, there are competing views about how we should cast our votes: in this case, to plump or not to plump.

This is particularly important with municipal, district and school board elections on Saturday, November 15.

Voter turnout for local elections in BC is traditionally well below 50%. Add to this the recent 20 month US presidential election soap opera, another minority government election in Ottawa last month and for many in Vancouver, two provincial by-elections also last month. More on lessons from these later, though.

When we look at how to vote in local governments, it's critical to understand how the "at-large" electoral process is different from voting provincially, federally and in the United States. In fact, understanding the at-large nature of local elections motivates a greater number of people to actually vote.

The at-large system is in some ways opposite to the first-past-the-post system in the provincial and federal elections. At-large means there are no ridings or constituencies within the municipality or regional district. Aside from casting one ballot for mayor, voters will vote from a pool of candidates anywhere from one to however many sit on each local council or school board.

This is where plumping comes in. If there are six spots beyond mayor on your city council we can vote for up to six candidates standing for election. But why not vote for one? This is plumping or bullet voting, where we target one or a small number of candidates to focus our vote on without diluting the effect of our vote by voting for other people who could end up beating our preferred candidate(s).

Many object to the spirit of plumping for some good reasons. They argue that it undermines the value of at-large voting where we get to vote for more than one candidate, unlike in provincial and federal elections. It can also undermine one view of the spirit of voting: if we are allowed six votes, we shouldn't waste any of them.

Fans of plumping argue that most people are not familiar with enough candidates running to be able to cast completely informed votes. So many people want to avoid casting ballots for people who aren't necessarily deserving of that vote.

Plus, our electoral system is broken, so we should make the best of it when we get that pencil in our hands. This is a tired refrain for many of us, but it is something you should be braced to hear much more of in the future as there are broad movements to fix our electoral process.

I won't even go into the complications of the US Electoral College, that great 18th century relic that skews the popular vote to elect a president, but the provincial and federal systems are equally irrelevant.

First-past-the-post worked quite well a century ago when there were typically two parties running for government. With only two candidates in a riding, the winner will get more than 50% of the vote and wasted votes were always less than 50% of those cast.

But today, with five viable federal parties (even with the Bloc only in Quebec) and more than two viable parties in most provinces, first-past-the-post ensures millions of votes are wasted across the country.

Dreadfully, in 1988 Brian Mulroney was reelected prime minister and rammed his Free Trade Agreement through government when 43% of Canadians voted for his party, which perversely allowed him to get a majority government. Considering that voter turnout was only 72%, less than one-third of eligible votes actually voted for free trade. Now we need to clean up that illegitimate mess.

The electoral reform referendum almost passed in BC in 2005 and likely will this spring, even though a similar referendum only got around 37% support in Ontario's election last fall [see the comments below]. But then again, Ontario has often been pivotal in Liberal and Conservative governments for all of Canadian history, so they likely aren't eager to move to a proportional representation system and lose their inordinate electoral power.

Also, our system typically produces majority governments for parties that earn less than 50% of the popular vote, where federally, voter turnout has declined in almost every election since that disastrous free trade election in 1988.

With five viable federal parties, a voting system designed for a two-party system is obsolete, as are majority governments. So people have responded with coordinated vote swapping systems on the internet, and some rather complicated strategic voting schemes.

All this means that our electoral systems are up for debate.

When it comes to your municipal, district and school board votes on Saturday, ask yourself how many candidates you are capable of effectively evaluating. Search the web, check your municipality's website. Get informed.

Then ask yourself how many of them you can truly support with integrity. And then vote responsibly. This will likely end up meaning that in Vancouver many COPE, Vision and Green supporters will likely only be voting for their own party's candidates, despite the electoral agreement. The agreement does not outlaw plumping, after all.

And while you're fighting off the strain of so many elections, [look into BC-STV](#). That referendum will be on the ballot again on May 12, 2009 during our provincial election. It's not a perfect proportional representation system, but it makes our current system look like the largely inadequate attempt at democracy we've been stuck with for our whole history.

So plump if you want to, but by all means make your vote matter--at least to yourself.