

Does Canada Need a Green Party?

On October 3, 2020, Annamie Paul was selected as the new leader of the Green Party of Canada. She was chosen over her 7 rivals for the position after 8 rounds of voting. Paul succeeds Elizabeth May who led the party for 14 years and was, for most of that time, its only MP in the House of Commons.

Annamie Paul assumes the helm of a party that won 6.6 percent of the popular vote and three seats in the last federal election. The Green Party has never won more than the 6.8 percent of the national popular vote it received in 2008. Only three Green Party candidates have ever been elected to the House of Commons. As I record this podcast, Paul is not an elected Member of Parliament. She plans, however, to run in a by-election in Toronto-Centre.

It would appear that the new leader of the Green Party has a daunting task ahead of her. While Green parties have done well in a number of democracies, even achieving partnership status in coalition governments and being elected to govern in some major European cities and regional governments, the electoral track record of the Green Party of Canada is unimpressive.

The explanation for this difference between the election results achieved by the Green Party of Canada and those of its cousins in Europe and in New Zealand lies in Canada's single member, simple plurality electoral system, or what is perhaps more often called a First-Past-the-Post system. Under this electoral model, the winning candidate in each riding is the person who receives the greatest number of votes. This system punishes minor parties whose support is widely distributed across the country. On the other hand, a proportional representation

system, such as exists in almost all of the countries where Green parties are more successful than in Canada, is based on the principle that a party should be rewarded with a share of seats in the legislature proportionate to its share of the popular vote.

All of this is well known and it comes as no surprise that the Green Party has always advocated for the adoption of proportional representation in Canada. But would a larger contingent of Green Party MPs in Parliament make a difference? It obviously would make a difference for the Green Party, which has never elected nearly enough MPs to earn official party standing in the House of Commons. The adoption of proportional representation might well result in more Canadians being willing to cast their votes for Green party candidates than is true under the current electoral system, where a vote for the Green Party doubtless seems to many Canadians a wasted vote. But would a greater Green party presence in Parliament translate into better environmental policies, whatever "better" might mean?

The answer to this question is obvious, right? More Green Party MPs and a louder Green voice in Parliament, including the prospect of the Greens having leverage over a minority government or even participating in a coalition government as has happened in some European countries and New Zealand--this would surely result in more attention to environmental matters and to policy reforms contributing to better environmental outcomes.

In fact this is not obvious. Yale University publishes an annual ranking and report called the Environmental Policy Index or EPI. (<https://epi.yale.edu/downloads/epi2020report20200911.pdf>) It is based on a number of measures related to the state of environmental sustainability around the world. In 2020 Canada

places 20th of the 180 countries included in the EPI ranking. Other countries without proportional representation that rank in the top 20 include the United Kingdom (4th), France (5th), and Australia (13th). Japan, which ranks 12th in the 2020 EPI, uses a combination of the single member, simple plurality system and proportional representation, whereby 295 members of the national legislature are elected to represent individual constituencies and the remaining 180 seats are distributed on the basis of proportional representation.

Most of the countries in the EPI top 20 have some variant of a proportional representation electoral system. But several do not. So it appears that having an electoral system such as that in Canada or the UK, or France's run-off voting system, is not a bar to achieving a comparatively good environmental record. Moreover, there are certainly other and perhaps more important factors that explain a country's environmental performance. And indeed the literature on this question demonstrates conclusively that foremost among these factors is national wealth. Wealthier countries are better able than less wealthy ones to be able to finance the infrastructure, administrative capacity and other costs that contribute to better environmental outcomes. (*EPI 2020*, p.39)

But there are other factors too. The most important of these, according to Yale's EPI, is the quality of governance. The EPI measures this using the World Bank's World Governance Indicators. (<http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/>), none of which have to do with a country's electoral system per se, but that involve mechanisms providing voice and accountability for citizens, the rule of law, control of corruption, perceptions and the quality of public services, and so on. The 2020 EPI report states, "The literature provides robust evidence

that most of the World Governance Indicators are significantly correlated with [a country's environmental sustainability score].(*EPI 2020*, p.41)

A second factor that correlates strongly with how well a country performs on the EPI is the sectoral composition of the economy. A higher share of services in a country's economy correlates with higher scores on the EPI. The explanation for this, states the EPI report, is that, "pressures on the environment lessen as countries de-industrialize and shift to a services-based economy."(*EPI 2020*, p.41)

Neither of these two factors identified by Yale's EPI report has anything to do with whether a country has a proportional representation or a single member, simple plurality electoral system. We might go further and ask whether strong environmental NGOs, public opinion that is sensitive to environmental issues, and political parties that are broader-based in their support than Green parties typically are, but that respond to these environmental concerns, can ensure that the national conversation on environmental matters and governments' responses to pressures coming from civil society are enough to result in a country's environmental sustainability performance being at least as good as those of many countries that have proportional representation and more Green Party representation in their legislatures.

In answer to this, the Green Party of Canada and its supporters will say, "obviously not!" But the literature on the correlates of a country's environmental performance suggests that Green parties may be wrong about this. In addition to the Yale EPI data that has been mentioned, a study that compared the environmental performance of consensus democracies

that, "facilitate formal representation of green issues in government" to majoritarian democracies, "characterised by pluralistic interest group politics"(412), arrives at this conclusion: "Are consensus democracies more environmental?...Although there is some support for this claim the evidence is mixed and is dependent on how one measures environmental effectiveness."(425)

So here's a question. Would electoral reform, resulting in perhaps 20 or 30 additional Green Party MPs in the House of Commons, make a difference for Canada's environmental performance?

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