

Winning and Losing Elections: What does it mean to ‘throw the bums out’?

In the BC election of 1972, it has been argued that Dave Barrett caught the mood of the electorate with the simple campaign slogan: “*Tell them enough is enough!*” An electorate that was tired of Socred rule for the previous thirty years agreed and catapulted an NDP government into power. For their trouble, they too were thrown out after one mandate even though they increased their popular vote in the process.

In some ways, the idea of “throwing the bums out”, “time for a change”, “it’s time to put somebody new in there”, “let’s start with a clean slate” or “give someone else a chance” is embedded in our political culture. It’s an important feature of the “First past the post” electoral system that many of us fear would be lost if this part of our electoral system is ever replaced.

Of course, ‘first past the post’ works best in a system with two parties since ‘throwing the bums out’ means that the winning party has to get more votes than the losing party. However, in our entrenched three-party system in Ontario, *throwing the bums out* allowed the NDP to oust the Liberals with a majority government based on 38% of the vote while Mike Harris, in turn, threw *them* out with another majority comprised of 40% of the vote.

Clearly, the majority of *voters* (62% and 60% respectively) may have wanted to defeat the party in power but could not agree on who they wanted to install in their place; but the vote-splitting had the effect of installing a new minority based on the disagreement over who should replace the previous government. So in our system in Ontario, a clean slate and a brand new mandate has the clear drawback that it has not been supported by a majority, not since 1937 when Mitch Hepburn won re-election.

When we begin to learn about new ways to correct our current voting system, almost all choices lead to more proportional representation allowing the electorate to have its voting choices more accurately represented in government. But in his presentation at the Queens University symposium on electoral reform, Professor Richard S. Katz told us that proportional representation tends to continue the power of all parties given that each will always have their backers that must be represented. He said that, in essence, the Christian Democrats in Italy have been in power for 50 years since a plurality of people always vote for Christian democrats.

What may look to Canadian eyes as instability in Italy with its government constantly falling is, in Professor Katz’ eyes, excessive stability, since it is always the Christian Democrats that pick up the pieces. We constantly hear about corruption there just as we hear about it in Canada; yet it starts to appear that in a proportional representation system, it would be harder to ever replace governing parties.

It is this issue that I would like to address in my remarks. The question is this:

Is it important to have a system where it is harder to throw a party out or is it better to make it as easy as it is now in Ontario?

Since starting with a clean slate is based on the idea of winners and losers of elections, I would like to begin by talking a bit about the imagery of winning and losing in our society.

Although most of our modern analogues concerning winning and losing come from the battlefield, I am not going to talk about war. Modern warfare across the world is almost unwinnable in the same way that wars were won historically. From Iraq to Afghanistan, from Northern Ireland to Sri Lanka, modern wars do not lend themselves easily to the idea of having winners and losers as increasing globalization tends to usher in a host of backers, conciliators and cranky electorates that make it much more difficult to wage ‘winner vs. loser’ wars regardless of military superiority. Just ask George Bush.

However, most war analogues have been seamlessly appropriated by modern sport and it is in this arena that we can read and listen to a daily barrage about winning and losing. In both politics and sports, the event of winning or losing is remarkably similar, especially as presented on television. The champagne is poured, the speeches are made and praise is heaped on the winners while vivid post mortems from those who won and lost are played over and again.

But even though the *imagery* of winning and losing is somewhat the same in both sports and in elections, the reality is very very different.

In sport, what happens after the big win is essentially *nothing*. Once you win, the tournament or season is over. No one expects anything more from you. You may receive a cup and a ring but the role of the winner is essentially passive. The winner gets no special recognition in the next round or season and therefore starts in the same place as everyone that lost to them. The winner’s status in the longer term is prestigious but essentially trivial for anyone but their bankers and a small cadre of die-hard fans

In politics and governance, it is exactly the opposite. Once you win, the season *begins*. The role is active and certainly not trivial. People expect everything from you. Once the government is called into session, your win means everything as you have the mandate to govern. The prestige is perhaps the only element that a big sports win and a political win have in common.

From these observations, there appears to be some measure of truth to the idea that “politics is not a sport” and ought not to be *viewed* as a sport with its winner/loser mentality. It may therefore follow that the ‘punishment-reward’ fulcrum and the ‘oppressor-victim’ analogue that are often used in the description of sporting events is likely also inappropriate in the political sphere.

‘Agenda based majority governments’ in our ‘first past the post’ system most clearly raise the problem associated with winning an election. To those that win these majority governments, often with 38% to 45% of the vote, winning means that they have the legal right to impose their plan on the majority of citizens. They often justify the right to impose their plan by claiming that the electorate gave them a majority government or a mandate (almost always without acknowledging that the majority of voters voted for them not to impose it).

They also justify imposing their plan by saying that the plan was available in advance and the voters gave them a majority government mandate after reading the plan (even though – once again - the majority of voters voted against it). Similarly, they know that their majority that was won from a minority of voters is very easily overturned in a subsequent winner-take-all election and that political credit for any plan must be achievable inside the present mandate.

Accordingly, the imposition of any plan justified by *winning* has some important side effects beyond the simple truth that the real majority of voters clearly voted against it. In Ontario, it has also tended to mean that we have successive governments that:

- Rip down what previous governments built up e.g. Mike Harris and welfare legislation
- Blame previous governments for any inability or incapacity to implement their own plan e.g. all of them
- Take special measures to ensure that ripping down what they built up will be more difficult for successive governments (e.g. legislate more than necessary –such as ‘no deficit legislation’)
- Look to the very short term to achieve their political goals (i.e. four years or under)
- Avoid long term or difficult reforms as it is harder to get credit for them when they come to fruition beyond the mandate (e.g. waste and energy management plans); and
- Constantly wrangle and oppose other levels of government that don’t share their political ideology (e.g. by 2004, Ontario was the only province that did not have federal/provincial accords on either immigration or labour market development.)

Conclusion

I have now come to realize that the importance of winning and *throwing the bums out* is not quite as important as I thought it was. We may feel good about having the losers lose and humiliated for their ideological excesses or complacency but in essence, ***we are throwing ourselves out too.***

Constantly suffering the lurch from one political agenda to another is neither a good model of governance nor optimal for democracy. In Ontario where we have elected the opposite party provincially to whomever we supported in the previous federal election¹ since the days of Diefenbaker, it is clear that we have suffered in Ontario for our incapacity to make deals and sign accords.

We have neglected our environment, mismanaged our energy resources, raised and cut welfare programs, legislated mightily while calling for de-regulation, and made a cottage industry of blaming our predecessors for each of these ills.

So I am ready for a new era without winners and losers to hail and humiliate and even more ready for boring continuity as superior to the exciting disruption of the extremes of electoral ‘slate cleanings’.

Once that happens, perhaps we will start to get better government and we won’t have to think of politicians in the derogatory ways we associate with our sports heroes when they fail to come home with the expected silverware. Surely we can avoid the internal bickering that characterizes Italy’s Christian democrats and bring true representative government to Ontario.

I do not know enough to favour the mechanics of one form of truly representative democracy over another but I hope that the Citizen’s Assembly will recommend a referendum on one of them rather than retaining the winner-take-all ‘sport’ that too often characterizes electoral politics in our province.

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November 27, 2006

¹ The only exceptions are the votes for Progressive Conservative Joe Clark in 1979 while Bill Davis was Premier and for Liberal Paul Martin’s minority while Liberal Dalton McGuinty remained as Premier. The status quo was quickly re-established in both cases when Pierre Trudeau returned in 1980 and Stephen Harper became Prime Minister in 2006.