Over the last two decades, many countries and cities have been actively debating about whether to reform their electoral system. Some, like Italy, Romania, and the city of San Francisco, have gone one step further and actually reformed their electoral system. Canada has not been insulated from such discussions. Indeed, Canadians must remember that in the last three years, both British Columbia and Ontario have held referenda on proposals to reform their provincial electoral systems. Quebec has been debating on this issue as well. And there have been repeated calls for electoral reform at the federal level. This was pretty clear when Rex Murphy invited the listeners of his CBC Radio program to comment on the results of the recent federal election: several of them started by strongly objecting to the current electoral system and then continued by calling for its replacement.

If many citizens and political scientists have been actively involved in this debate, the same cannot be said about economists. Economists’ relative absence from the debate is all the more regrettable that it is not motivated by a lack of interest on their part. Indeed, constitutional rules in general, and voting rules in particular, have important economic consequences. Moreover, economists have for long been studying elections and the rules that govern them. My goal here is to give you a flavour of what economists can contribute to the electoral reform debate.

If some people (especially small party leaders, like Elizabeth May) have been calling for replacing the current electoral system with Proportional Representation, others have been advocating electoral systems that would give voters the opportunity to cast multiple votes. This can take many forms, like letting voters tick the names of several candidates, or asking voters to rank-order the candidates (as was proposed in British Columbia), or even holding multiple election rounds (as is done in France).

But would letting voters vote for multiple candidates make a difference? And would the difference, if any, be desirable? After all, no one wants to go through the hassle of an electoral reform if it is not to get something better. As you can imagine, electoral reform advocates have been quick at giving arguments in favour of such a reform. To make their point clear, let me use here two examples. The first example concerns the 2000 U.S. presidential election. Some people have argued that Ralph Nader cost Al Gore the election by siphoning votes from
him, which resulted in Florida landing in Bush’s column. Electoral reform advocates have then pointed out that this might not have happened had voters been allowed to vote for a second candidate: Nader’s voters seemed more likely to have cast a second vote for Gore than for Bush. The second example concerns Michael Bloomberg’s decision to not join the 2008 U.S. presidential race. Some have argued that this decision was motivated by the examples of Ross Perot and the likes, who had trouble convincing voters that they had a good chance of winning the election and, therefore, that voters should not fear wasting their only vote on them. Some electoral reform advocates have pointed out that Michael Bloomberg’s decision might have been different if voters had been given the option to vote for a second candidate: indeed, being a centrist, Michael Bloomberg would arguably have been perceived as an acceptable compromise by many voters who might then have cast a vote for him. What these two examples convey is that an electoral reform that would let voters vote for multiple candidates would arguably benefit centrists since they tend to have a broader appeal and would therefore be better poised to receive more votes. The election of centrists would, some argue, lead to the adoption of more moderate policies. Such policy moderation would have important economic consequences, like lessening the differences in the economic policy of successive governments.

But can we indeed expect that letting voters vote for multiple candidates would lessen polarization and yield policy moderation? In a couple of recent contributions I show that this may not be the case and that the reverse may actually happen, i.e., the type of electoral reform proposed might lead to more, instead of less, polarization. As always with electoral systems, the devil is in the details. It would depend on whether voters are asked to rank the candidates or not, and for up to how many candidates each voter can vote. It would also depend on whether voters are forced to vote for multiple candidates or whether they are merely allowed to do so. Not surprisingly, voters’ behaviour would matter as well: the extent of policy moderation could be strikingly different if voters are strategic and take the electoral prospects of the candidates into account when deciding for whom to vote, or if instead, voters vote sincerely and base their voting decision solely on their preferences for the different candidates, irrespective of their electoral prospects. In the current system, a sizable number of voters act strategically. But would it still be the case in more complex systems such as the one that was proposed in the BC referendum? If all these factors, and others, play a crucial role in whether the electoral system would lead to more or less polarization, it is because different electoral systems provide different incentives for candidate entry. Some systems provide stronger incentives for

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centrists to enter the race, others provide instead stronger incentives for extremists to stand for election, and still others (like the current system) give an advantage to the established parties, thereby erecting barriers to new candidates.

The main message that comes out of all this is one of caution. As I mentioned above, when it comes to electoral reform, the devil is in the details. An electoral system that ‘works’ in a country may not ‘work’ in another country. Likewise, a variant of an electoral system, even a close one, might yield very different, and quite possibly opposite, outcomes compared to the original system. The recent electoral reform in Italy is a case in point: although the new Italian electoral system is closely related to the German one, the outcome is very different. Careful study is therefore needed before passing any electoral reform. The stakes are too high to not be careful.

I would like to conclude by emphasizing the need for alternative, complementary viewpoints on electoral reform. Political scientists are often given centre stage when it comes to electoral reform, and there are good reasons for this. However, others have also an interest in the question: the consequences of an electoral reform go far beyond the political sphere. Economists, psychologists, philosophers and mathematicians, to name just a few, have for long been reflecting on the issue. By approaching the problem from different angles and by using different techniques of analysis, they all have valuable insights they can bring to the debate.