

DUBIOUS DEMOCRACY REPORT

**Canadian Provincial Elections
1980 - 2000**

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Introduction

The following pages provide a summary assessment of the results of Canadian provincial elections held between 1980 and 2000.

The assessment examined a number of problems created by Canada's first-past-the-post voting system: wasted votes, distorted outcomes, phony majority governments, exaggerated majority governments, and declining voter turnout. The election data illustrates the shortcomings of the current voting system and how it compromises the basic principles of representative democracy.

The assessment was based on election data compiled by Christopher Billows in *Polls, Parties and Power* (2002). This 312-page compilation of provincial and federal election data is available at www.accidentaldesign.com/download.html.

1. UNREPRESENTED CITIZENS: Millions of Votes Do Not Count

Representative democracy is based on the idea that every citizen has an equal vote. By casting their votes in elections, citizens gain representation in the parliament or legislative assembly. That's the theory. Unfortunately, in Canada, theory and reality diverge.

Canada's winner-take-all (or first-past-the-post) voting system does not treat all votes equally and does not provide political representation for a significant portion, and sometimes the majority, of voters.

A winner-take-all system is just what it says. Those casting votes for the most popular candidate win political representation. The other voters in that riding or district lose their right to representation. The latter group of voters cast "wasted" votes – they gained no more representation than those who didn't even cast votes.

The average percentage of wasted votes cast in provincial elections from 1980 to 2000, were as follows:

	Percent wasted	Average number of wasted votes cast
1. Ontario	50.8%	1,962,867
2. Nova Scotia	50.2%	223,140
3. British Columbia	49.6%	817,870
4. Manitoba	48.1%	239,881
5. Saskatchewan	47.7%	231,596
6. New Brunswick	45.9%	182,625
7. Alberta	45.8%	404,253
8. Quebec	44.5%	1,638,851
9. PEI	43.9%	53,206
10. Newfoundland	43.0%	120,383

The average for wasted votes cast in federal elections during the same period was 49.1%, or more than 6.2 million votes. By comparison, in the 1999 election in New Zealand with a mixed proportional voting system, only 7% of the voters cast wasted votes.

2. DISTORTED ELECTION OUTCOMES: What We Say is Not What We Get

Because the first-past-the-post voting system does not produce representation for all voters, election outcomes are usually distorted.

Some parties gain a much higher portion of seats than their portion of the popular vote, while others receive lower portions or sometimes none at all. The distortion of results is why most major democracies scrapped this voting system long ago.

There are various ways to measure this distortion between what voters are saying and what they get. One method is to measure the differences between the percentages of the popular vote and the percentage of seats won by each party. These differences are then tallied and divided by two to provide a distortion factor for the election. (See example at right.)

The average distortion for the elections in each province from 1980 to 2000, were as follows:

1. New Brunswick	30.8%
2. PEI	26.6%
3. Alberta	24.6%
4. Saskatchewan	23.8%
5. Quebec	20.0%
6. Nova Scotia	19.3%
7. Newfoundland	19.0%
8. British Columbia	18.1%
9. Ontario	15.4%
10. Manitoba	13.8%
Federal elections	18.8%

Calculation of Vote to Seat Distortion			
	Pop. Vote	Seats Won	Difference
Party A	40%	60%	20%
Party B	35%	30%	5%
Party C	25%	10%	15%
			40%
40% total difference divided by 2 =			
distortion factor of 20%			

3. PHONY MAJORITY GOVERNMENTS: Majority Rule or Majority Fooled?

Democracy is not only based on the principle of equal votes, but also the principle of majority rule. The theory is that every citizen casts an equal vote and then the majority win the right to make decisions. But what happens to the principle of majority rule when the voting system distorts the results?

Canadians are often subject to rule by phony majority governments – governments formed by parties that captured a majority of seats in parliament or a legislative assembly *without* winning a majority of the popular vote.

Since 1921, Canada has had 15 majority federal governments – but only 4 were legitimate majority governments, elected by a majority of the popular vote. The phoniest majority at the federal level was in 1997, when the Liberals captured a majority of seats with only 38.5% of the popular vote.

In the provinces, 33 of the 54 elections between 1980-2000 produced phony majority governments. The phoniest majorities formed during that period were:

1. Ontario NDP (1990): 37.6% popular vote (56.9% of the seats)¹
2. Nova Scotia PC (1999): 39.2% popular vote (57.7% of the seats)
3. British Columbia NDP (1997): 39.5% popular vote (52.0% of the seats)²

¹ The last time Ontario had a majority government elected by a majority of voters was 1929-1934.

² The BC NDP formed this majority government despite finishing second in the popular vote.

4. EXAGGERATED MAJORITY GOVERNMENTS: Denying Opposition Viewpoints

Canada’s voting system often subjects us to phony majority governments at both the federal and provincial levels. At the provincial level, however, voters are also subject to the opposite type of distortion.

An exaggerated majority government occurs when a party actually wins a majority of votes cast, but gains far more seats than deserved. The result is the voices of opposition are severely reduced.

Between 1980 and 2000, 17 of the 54 provincial elections produced governments with majorities exaggerated far beyond their portion of the popular vote. Two-thirds of these occurred in just three provinces: PEI (5), New Brunswick (3) and Alberta (3). In the case of the 1987 New Brunswick election, the opposition was completely eliminated from the assembly.

The most dramatically exaggerated majority governments during this period were:

			<u>Popular vote</u>	<u>Seats won</u>	<u>Exaggerated representation</u>
1993	PEI	Liberals	55.1%	96.9%	41.8%
1987	NB	Liberals	60.4%	100.0%	39.6%
2000	PEI	Tories	57.9%	96.3%	38.4%

[Note: In 2001, just after the period covered by this study, the B.C. Liberals received 57.6% of the popular vote and won 97.5% of the seats, making it the second largest exaggerated majority since 1980.]

5. DEMOCRACY DROP-OUTS: Citizens Vote “No Confidence” in the System

What happens when you have a voting system that wastes votes, provides no representation for nearly half the voters, distorts election outcomes, and subjects us to both phony and exaggerated majority governments? Not surprisingly, the motivation to vote is greatly reduced.

Canada ranked 77th in the world in average voter turn-out between 1945 and 2000.

With voting systems where every citizen can cast an effective vote for any party or candidate, the motivation to participate is higher. Countries with fair voting systems, based on proportional representation, tend to have higher voter turn-outs.

Voter turn-out in Canadian federal elections has been decreasing since 1984, with the lowest turnout in Canadian history happening in the 2000 federal election.

1980	69.3%
1984	75.3%
1988	75.3%
1993	69.6%
1997	67.0%
2000	61.2%

Average voter turnout in provincial elections varied between 1980 and 2000 from a low of 56.2% in Alberta to a high of 82.9% in PEI. The worst average voter turnouts in provincial elections during this period were:

1 st	Alberta:	56.2%
2 nd	Ontario:	61.3%
3 rd	Manitoba	70.1%