



Fair Le Mouvement pour
Vote la représentation équitable
Canada au Canada

VOTING SYSTEMS: WE HAVE CHOICES!

Fortunately, we are not stuck with the system we have. Most established democracies use other voting systems that better represent what voters are saying.

To best understand the choices, we can divide voting systems into three families: 1) winner-take-all, 2) proportional (or fair) representation, and 3) mixed systems.

WINNER-TAKE-ALL: MANY VOTERS LOSE

Canada uses a winner-take-all system (often called first-past-the-post or single member plurality). These systems generally elect just one MP from each riding. The candidate with the most votes (plurality system) or a majority of votes (majoritarian system) wins the seat.

These systems divide voters into two groups - those who will have their voices represented in parliament and those who don't. In other words, winner-take-all voting means a huge portion of citizens, sometimes the majority, lose their right to political representation.

These systems usually give a majority of seats to a single party, even when a majority of voters voted against that party. Winner-take-all systems tend to over-represent one point of view (which is usually not even a majority) and significantly under-represent or even eliminate other viewpoints.

Because the votes of many citizens are wasted, not surprisingly, countries using these systems generally have lower voter turnout.

The only other major Western democracies using the Canadian version of winner-take-all (first-past-the-post) for national elections are the United States and Britain.¹ When the new democracies in Eastern Europe chose their voting systems, not one adopted the first-past-the-post voting system used by Canada.

"The present [voting] system...creates a wholly false image of the country, based on illusory majorities and exaggerated regionalism, as harmful to the legitimacy of government as it is to national unity. Surely we can agree: Just about any system would be better than the one we have now."

*Andrew Coyne
August 31, 2001
National Post Column*

¹ While the British Parliamentary elections use a winner-take-all system, the newly established Scottish and Welsh assemblies use proportional voting systems.

PROPORTIONAL SYSTEMS: MAKE EVERY VOTE COUNT

In contrast to winner-take-all systems, 75 democracies have chosen proportional representation (or fair voting) systems - including most long-term democracies, most European countries and most of the major nations of the Americas.

The core principle is to treat all voters equally - to make every vote count. When votes are treated equally, then election results are proportional. Parties get the seats they deserve - no more, no less.

If a party receives 40% of the popular vote, that party receives approximately 40% of the seats (not 50% or 60%). If another party wins 20% of the vote, that party gains 20% of the seats (not 10% or 0%). In other words, the parties' representation reflects the way people voted.

How do these systems work? Countries have been very creative in designing variations to fit their political cultures. However, they all have electoral districts (or ridings) that have more than one representative elected. Ireland uses districts typically with just 3 to 5 representatives. In Belgium, districts vary in size from 5 to 48 representatives. The Netherlands treats the entire nation as one big district with 150 MPs.

The other general characteristic is the use of party lists. When elections are held, each party publishes a list of candidates. Based on the percentage of votes received by a party in a particular region, a certain percentage of candidates from each party's list win seats

In many countries, each party's list is actually printed on the ballot. That allows voters to vote for the party they support and then vote for individual candidates on the list. Some systems even allow voters to choose and rank candidates in different parties.

In summary, proportional or fair voting systems can be designed in many ways to fit the political culture of the nation. If citizens want to retain elements of local representation, to vote for independent candidates, to rank candidates nominated by the parties, to cross party lines when voting - these and other features can be built into the system.

Partial listing of countries using proportional voting systems

<i>Argentina</i>	<i>Netherlands</i>
<i>Austria</i>	<i>New Zealand</i>
<i>Belgium</i>	<i>Nicaragua</i>
<i>Bolivia</i>	<i>Norway</i>
<i>Brazil</i>	<i>Panama</i>
<i>Chile</i>	<i>Paraguay</i>
<i>Columbia</i>	<i>Peru</i>
<i>Czech Republic</i>	<i>Poland</i>
<i>Denmark</i>	<i>Portugal</i>
<i>Finland</i>	<i>Scotland</i>
<i>Germany</i>	<i>Serbia</i>
<i>Greece</i>	<i>Slovakia</i>
<i>Hungary</i>	<i>Slovenia</i>
<i>Iceland</i>	<i>South Africa</i>
<i>Indonesia</i>	<i>Spain</i>
<i>Ireland</i>	<i>Sweden</i>
<i>Israel</i>	<i>Switzerland</i>
<i>Italy</i>	<i>Turkey</i>
<i>Luxembourg</i>	<i>Uruguay</i>
<i>Mexico</i>	<i>Venezuela</i>
	<i>Wales</i>

MIXED SYSTEMS OFFER MORE OPPORTUNITIES

Not surprisingly, there are many hybrids, where nations have taken characteristics of both winner-take-all systems and merged them with proportional systems.

While still classified as a proportional system (because it produces proportional results), Germany and more recently New Zealand, Scotland and Wales use mixed systems.

On election day, the German voter casts two votes. Each vote determines how half the seats are filled. One vote is for a riding MP, who is elected the same way we fill seats in Canada. Whichever riding candidate wins the most votes wins the local seat. The second vote is cast for a party. Based on the percentage of support for each party, the remaining seats in parliament are filled by party list candidates to ensure that each party has the portion of parliamentary seats that reflects their total voter support.

The German and New Zealand System

Every voter casts a vote for a local candidate and a vote for a party. About half of the seats are filled with the local candidates. The remaining seats are topped up from party lists to ensure proportionality.

IS THE ALTERNATIVE VOTE (AV) REALLY AN ALTERNATIVE?

Why is preference voting in a winner-take-all system a bad idea?

The Australian system - called the Alternative Vote - is a winner-take-all system, which is often confused with some forms of proportional representation. This system is very similar to first-past-the-post. One MP is elected from each riding. The ballot is similar, but rather than placing an X next to the preferred candidates, voters can rank order all candidates on the ballot (sometimes called "preference voting"). If no

candidate wins a majority of first-choice votes, then the least popular candidate is dropped, and those ballots are re-assigned according to the second choices, and so on, until one candidate has a majority of ballots. Proponents say this gives voters more choice and ensures that the winner has majority support.

Sound good? Unfortunately, it simply recreates most of the problems with our current system (which is probably why only one major democracy uses this system). Adding second and third choice votes in order to create a winner does not magically create "majority" support that didn't exist before.

Most voters struggle to find a first-choice candidate. Lower choices are usually a lesser of evils ranking. Most Canadians are already "represented" by their second or third choice - that's the problem, not the solution. If used in Canada, this voting system also has the potential to create even more distorted election results than the current system. If forced to rank parties, many if not most supporters of other parties would place the Liberals second - not because they like the Liberal Party, but because they dislike the others even more. Studies have shown, therefore, that the federal Liberal Party, with the exact same level of voter support as today, would gain even more seats under the Alternative Vote than with first-past-the-post.

(Note: France uses another variation of this system, called two-round voting, but the effect and related problems are similar.)

"Back in high school, we learned that voting reform was needed in the 19th century because of "pocket" or "rotten" boroughs, where a handful of voters elected the local MP. Today, you could call Canada a rotten, or pocket, country. Democratically speaking, proportional representation is a no brainer."

*Rick Salutin
May 25, 2001
Globe and Mail column*

ARGUMENTS AGAINST FAIR VOTING SYSTEMS

How can anyone argue against fair voting systems? Opponents generally warn there are dramatic trade-offs between good democracy and good government. If you demand "too much" democracy, they say, you lose the ability to form effective governments. But these arguments are not supported by the facts -- something you can readily see by scanning the list of nations already using fair voting systems.

Coalitions Are No Way to Run Government

The most popular scare tactic relates to coalition governments. Since a majority of voters seldom support a single party, fair voting seldom produces a single-party majority government. Two or more parties will have to negotiate, compromise and cooperate to form government and pass legislation.

Is that "bad"? Or is that what democracy is really all about?

Governments formed under any voting system are coalitions of different viewpoints. In Canada, these shifting coalitions are formed within the large parties, generally hidden from public view except during leadership races. The large and small factions argue, negotiate and then compromise on the party platform and policies.

The primary differences between this backroom approach, currently used in Canada, and the formation of coalition governments under fair voting systems is that the latter is done in public view, the compromises are publicly known, and the resulting coalition always represents a true majority of voters.



"For those who argue that anything but our existing system will fail to produce [single party] majority governments - seen by many as a more effective governing vehicle - it is surely fair to respond that "majority" governments reflective of only a minority of the eligible voters in a democracy is a more serious problem. Stable government composed of more than one party is now the effective norm in continental Europe."

*Ed Broadbent and Hugh Segal
October 1, 2002, Globe and Mail*

Role of Small Parties: The Tail Wags the Dog

A related criticism is that very small parties will blackmail the big parties who need their support, to adopt their radical agendas. This means fringe viewpoints will have an extraordinary impact on government policy, according to these critics.

Anything is possible in politics, but consider one very practical safeguard. Any major party or political leader adopting an agenda out-of-step with its own support base will be severely punished at the next election. In fact, the logic of coalition-building is the opposite of the tail wagging the dog. It's more like the dog choosing the tail that fits.

Generally, two or more like-minded parties, who together represent a majority of voters, agree to form a coalition government. Their compromise agenda will generally focus on areas of policy agreement. If two parties representing a majority of voters have common policy interests, that often indicates majority public support for those policies.

In fact, research has shown that coalition governments tend to be better than single-party governments at producing legislation more in line with public thinking. But that's only logical. Coalition majority governments are formed by MPs representing the majority of voters - unlike Canada's phony majority governments put in power by only 40% of the voters.

Chaos Theory: The Two "I's"

Another frequent scare tactic is to point to the parliaments in Italy and Israel. Look at the bickering and instability! Elections are held every year and new governments are formed every few months!

Let's apply some perspective. With 75 nations using proportional systems, critics can find only these two extreme examples. Italy and Israel are as typical for proportional representation systems as India is for first-past-the-post (note: India is currently governed by an 18-party alliance in a parliament with 39 parties).

Opponents of fair voting don't like to talk about Germany, Switzerland and Sweden, or most of the other 71 countries, when they present their chaos scenarios. Current research indicates little difference in the length of time between elections in countries using proportional voting systems versus those using winner-take-all systems.

In fact, a landmark comparative study on effective government demonstrated that countries using fair voting readily match and often exceed the economic and social performance of nations run by single party governments (usually false majorities). This is not surprising, as the governments are more in touch with voters. [See information box: "What Do We Know...?" on page 7.]

Parties Will Multiply Like Rabbits

Critics sometimes proclaim that fair voting would produce a proliferation of small parties. True, some new parties may be formed and old parties may restructure. Why? Because when all Canadians are free to cast positive and effective votes, parties will have to truly reflect the range of viewpoints in this country. But history shows that the introduction of fair voting will likely result in only a marginal increase in the number of parties that can win seats and affect legislation. Why? It's only common sense. Most voters want to support parties that can have impact or growth potential. Some countries also set thresholds (e.g., 3% or 5% of the popular vote) before parties can win seats in parliament.

Fair voting systems do not create instability. Current research shows little difference in the length of time between elections in countries using proportional voting systems versus those using winner-take-all systems.

FAIR VOTING: DEVELOPING A MADE-IN-CANADA SOLUTION

Canadians deserve a fair voting system. We need a citizen-driven process to discuss alternatives and then choose a made-in-Canada system that fair representation and accountable government.

Will a new voting system require constitutional change? Will a fair voting system require an expanded House of Commons? The answer to both questions is no.

The following two examples outline systems that could be implemented without constitutional change, while keeping the House at the current size. However, these are just two of many approaches that might be considered.

[Note: Fair Vote Canada is developing more detailed examples of alternative voting systems for Canada. For more information, contact FVC at info@fairvotecanada.org or 416-410-4034.]

"While recognizing the embryonic state of the debate and the low level of awareness among many Canadians, it is nonetheless striking that a solid majority [64%] of Canadians support the implementation of a PR [proportional representation] system."

*Darrell Bricker, President &
Martin Redfern, Vice President,
Ipsos-Reid Public Affairs,
in July-August, 2001, Policy Options*

EXAMPLE 1: MULTI-MEMBER RIDINGS

One way to ensure proportionality is to have more than one person elected from each electoral district, or riding.

Using this approach, current ridings could be grouped together. In rural areas, we might group three or four ridings into one electoral district that elects three or four MPs. In urban areas, we might put together ten or twelve ridings, electing ten or 12 MPs from each.

In each of these larger electoral districts, parties would publish their lists of candidates for each election. Who creates these lists of candidates? Party members could do it democratically through an internal election or a convention process.

On election day, the ballots would list the party candidates in each riding. Voters would choose the party they support and then rank the candidates in that party. (Another variation would allow voters to rank candidates across party lines, if they wish. This system is called the single transferable vote, or STV.)

The parties would then win the portion of seats in that district based on the portion of voters supporting that party. If the district had 10 seats and Party A received 40% of the votes, it would win 4 of the 10 seats. The four most popular candidates from Party A would assume the seats. If Party B received 30% of the votes, it would win 3 of the 10 seats. And so on.

In summary, voters in this district would be electing MPs from a number of parties, ensuring that almost every voter is represented.

Ridings would be merged to create larger electoral districts where voters elect a number of MPs. The more MPs elected per district, the more proportionate and representative the results would be.

Before the election, party members would vote on which party candidates would appear on the lists. On election day, voters could also rank candidates on the ballot.

EXAMPLE 2: MIXED MODEL

Canada could also adopt a mixed system similar to Germany, New Zealand, Scotland and Wales, in order to achieve fair, or proportional, results.

In this case, about 60% of the seats (185) would be filled by riding MPs and the remaining 40% (123

seats) would be filled by list MPs (or at large MPs, not attached to any riding). Because there would be fewer ridings, each riding would be bigger than the current size. Parties would run candidates in the ridings, as well as publish a list of candidates in each province for the at-large positions.

On election day, voters would cast two votes on their ballots.

First, voters would see a list of parties and would be asked to cast a vote for one of them. These votes would determine the percentage of seats each party will have in the House.

Then, each voter casts a second vote for a local riding MP. This part of the ballot is the same as our current system. Each party would have one candidate running in the riding and independents may run as well. Whichever candidate wins the most votes wins the local riding seat.

If Party A won 40% of the votes, it would be allocated 40% of the seats (123) in the House. Let's say they won 100 of the riding elections. Since they deserve 123 MPs in total, Party A would have another 23 MPs elected from their list. Likewise, other parties will also gain some at-large, or list MPs, to ensure full representation for their supporters.¹

Under this system, voters gain additional representation because they have two types of MPs: 1) a local riding MP (who may or may not be someone they voted for) and 2) at-large MPs, including those elected from the party they support.

Parties would likely assign some or all of their at-large MPs to provide extra representation for constituents. For example, some may be assigned to help with constituent relations in ridings where their party did not win the local seat. Or the party may wish to assign some list MPs to liaise with particular population segments - e.g., rural voters, ethnic groups, students, etc. Others may be asked to focus solely on policy developments.

Every voter would elect a local riding MP, as we do now, and these MPs would occupy 60 percent of the seats from each province. Voters would also cast a vote for the party of their choice. The remaining seats would be filled by list candidates to ensure proportional results.

¹ For illustration purposes, this example refers to national vote and seat percentages. To meet constitutional constraints, the vote and seat percentages would have to be addressed on a province by province basis.

What do we know about countries using proportional (or fair) voting systems?

Based on the large number of countries using proportional, or fair, voting systems over extended periods of time, international experience demonstrates the following benefits over winner-take-all systems:

- Wasted votes and distorted election results are reduced.
- Phony majority governments are rare.
- Voter turnout tends to be higher.
- Parliaments are more representative of the range of political views and the composition of the electorate (gender, ethnicity, regions).
- These parliaments tend to pass legislation more in line with the views of the majority of the public.
- These countries maintain strong economic performance.
- Citizens tend to be more satisfied with the way democracy works.

Note: an excellent source of comparative international data appears in Arend Lijphart's *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries* (1999), Yale University Press. Fair Vote Canada also has a ten-page summary of key findings: *Can Fair Voting Systems Really Make a Difference?*, available on the Publications page at www.fairvote.ca.

Law Commission of Canada recommends mixed system

The Law Commission of Canada, an independent federal agency, carried out a two-year study and public consultation on federal voting system reform. Their final report, tabled in the House of Commons in March 2004, called for the introduction of a mixed proportional system. According to the Commission's plan, two-thirds of the seats would be filled through riding elections and the remaining one-third from party lists.

Similar mixed systems were recently recommended by electoral reform commissions in Quebec and Prince Edward Island.

For more information on the Law Commission of Canada's study *Voting Counts: Electoral Reform for Canada*, visit www.lcc.gc.ca, or info@lcc.gc.ca, or 613-946-8980



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