



Fair Representation
Vote équitable
Canada au Canada

Guide to Voting Systems

There are two types of voting system that you should know about.

Majority/Plurality systems

are designed to divide candidates, political parties, and voters into “winners” and “losers”—a few winners and lots of losers!

Proportional voting systems

are designed to give full and fair representation to everyone.

Majority/Plurality Systems (winner-take-all)

Single Member Plurality (SMP)

Canadians currently elect a single member in each riding. This system is usually referred to as First-Past-The-Post, because it is a winner-take-all system, like a horse race. The candidate with the most votes in each riding, a plurality, is elected. On average, members are elected with about 40% of the votes in their riding. Usually, a party with about 40% of the votes wins about 60% of the seats, a ‘majority’ government with a minority of the votes. In other words, most of us vote for people who do not get elected, so we end up with a government that most of us did not vote for.

Sometimes a party gets 60% of the votes and wins 90% of the seats, or 100%. Sometimes the party with the most votes loses the election! The system also discriminates against women and minority groups, and exacerbates regional differences.

For most of the last century, most industrial democracies have used voting systems that are designed to achieve **proportional representation (PR)**. A party which receives 40% of the votes will receive 40% of the seats in the legislature, not 60%. A party which receives 20% of the votes will win 20% of the seats, not 10%.

Countries with proportional voting systems usually have stable but responsive coalition governments. They elect more women and minorities, and have better geographic representation. Their voters are generally better satisfied with their governments, their politicians, and their political parties than are Canadians.

There are basically three different types of proportional voting systems, with limitless variations on the details of each.

The Alternative Vote (AV)

The Alternative Vote, also known as Instant Run-off Voting (IRV), uses a preferential ballot to elect members in single-member ridings. It is not a proportional voting system. AV is the right system to use when all choices must be reduced to one, such as electing a president, a governor or a mayor, or in a referendum, but it is not suited to electing a representative assembly. It eliminates vote splitting, but that only means it is even more effective than First-Past-The-Post at eliminating diversity, and thus creates an even less representative legislature. AV creates the illusion that each member is elected by a majority of the voters in each riding, but in fact, pretty much the same people get elected as in First-Past-The-Post. The Alternative Vote is used to elect the House of Commons in Australia and Nauru, and nowhere else.

Proportional Systems (treat voters equally)

Party List Systems

Most countries with proportional representation use a party list system. The lists may be national or regional. Each party puts forward a numbered list of candidates. The voters vote for the parties, rather than the candidates. Each party elects the number of candidates which is in proportion to the votes they received. For example, if there are, say, 100 members to elect, then each party puts forward a list of up to 100 candidates, numbered 1 to 100. A party which receives 20% of the votes will elect 20 members, numbers 1 through 20 on their list. Some systems allow voters to vote for individual candidates, to help move them further up the list.

Straight party list systems are not usually advocated for Canada.

Mixed Member Proportional Systems (MMP)

When Germany was reorganized in 1949, they developed a compromise system which tries to combine the best features of party list systems and our current First-Past-The-Post system. Half or more of the members are elected in single-member ridings like ours. The rest of the members are elected from party lists. Usually each voter gets to cast two votes, one to elect their local member, and another to vote for a party. The list seats are allocated to the parties in such a way as to compensate for the distortions caused in the riding elections, so that each party ends up with the right number of members in proportion to the votes they received, and the results are proportional overall. Similar systems are now used in New Zealand, and in regional parliaments in Scotland and Wales.

The Law Commission of Canada has recommended such a system for Canada. Royal commissions in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island recommended MMP systems for provincial elections. Quebec has draft legislation setting up such a system for Quebec elections.

Single Transferable Vote (STV)

The Single Transferable Vote, sometimes called Choice Voting, is a sophisticated system which uses a preferential ballot in multi-member districts. More than one member is elected in each district, and each party puts up a slate of candidates in each district. The voters number the candidates on the ballot in order of preference, 1, 2, 3, etc. They can structure their vote by party, by gender, by ethnic group, by geographic location, on the individual merits of the candidates, or according to whatever criteria are important to each individual voter.

The system also gets the most out of almost every vote by transferring surplus votes to later preferences. If a candidate receives twice as many votes as needed to get elected, the other half of each vote will be transferred to the next preference on the ballot.

The system works best in relatively small multi-member districts, so it is not necessarily as proportional as some other systems. Since voters vote for individual candidates and not directly for parties, the system is ideal for municipal or small group elections.

The Single Transferable Vote is used for national and local elections in Ireland, and for the Australian Senate. The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly recommended a STV system for British Columbia elections, and BC citizens voted almost 58% in favour of changing their voting system in a referendum on May 17, 2005, but the threshold for change had been set at 60%. BC will vote again on STV in 2008.