

Fair Voting for Toronto

How to Create a City Council That Represents All of Us

by moving beyond winner-take-all politics

Toronto is the most multi-cultural urban centre in the world with the potential to become an inspiration to the world – a model of how two-million people from all parts of the globe can live and work together in a healthy, harmonious and prosperous community. But that potential will remain untapped as long as we are hobbled by an antiquated and dysfunctional political system.

Toronto needs to develop a modern democratic system suitable for a major urban centre in the 21st century. Step one is building the foundation by adopting a fair and democratic voting system to elect our leaders and law-makers.

Who Elects Our City Council?

In the 2006 Toronto municipal election, only 41% of eligible voters cast votes. Because we use a winner-take-all voting system, only 56% of those casting votes actually elected anyone to Council.

The net effect: our City Council was elected by only 23% of all eligible voters. And we wonder why people don't feel well-represented? They feel that way because it's true.

Representation?

The current Toronto City Council was elected by only one in four eligible voters. That's not representative democracy.

Problem 1: Winner-Take-All Elections

Democracy was succinctly defined in 1865 by Swiss philosopher Ernest Naville: "In a democratic government, the right of decision belongs to the majority, but the right of representation belongs to all."

The principles are simple: voter equality and majority rule. Everyone elects a representative the majority of those representatives are empowered to make decisions.

Representation is a democratic right – not something that voters should win or lose at elections.

Canadians believe in those principles, but seldom experience them. Unlike voters in most developed nations, Torontonians (and all Canadians) use an antiquated and dysfunctional voting system that violates those core democratic principles.

Winner-take-all voting means that voters have to *compete against one another* and only a portion are able to elect a representative.

23% = Majority Rule?

Because of our dysfunctional voting system, many Toronto councillors are elected with relatively few votes. The 23 councillors who received the fewest votes could vote together, as a majority, and pass any law they wish, despite having received only 23% of the popular vote in the election.

In your ward, the City Council member may have been elected by 30%, 40%, 50% or 60% of the votes – which means that a large number of voters, often the majority, elected no one. That's winner-take-all: some voters win representation, while many others lose that basic democratic right.

In contrast, most developed nations use voting systems that allow 80%, 90% or more of the voters to cast votes that elect candidates. While not perfect, their voting systems are intentionally designed to create representative democracy.

Problem 2: Micro-Wards and Micro-Politics

Toronto City Council is currently composed of 44 people, each elected in one of 44 wards in winner-take-all elections.

What type of council does that create?

One in which individual councillors have more incentive to be micro-focused on pleasing one small group of voters in one ward than being broadly focused on the overall needs of the city.

Today's system rewards micro-politics and micro-thinking. For example, many people would argue it's an urgent priority for the city to put more resources into public transit and bike transportation. But winner-take-all ward politics is more likely to produce politicians focused on putting money and benefits into their own neighbourhood.

One former Toronto councillor told a public forum that she missed the deal-making on council – I’ll vote for your park if you vote for my community centre.

Sound harmless? Multiply that times 44 wards and ask yourself: is combining all these micro-interests the best way to create laws and make multi-million dollar budget and land use decisions for a city of 2.2 million people?

Or is it a system that rewards the wrong type of behaviour and creates a dysfunctional council?

“There needs to be a radical change on the council. For most of [my] colleagues, they are interested in protecting their neighbourhoods and not taking a citywide view.”

Councillor Kyle Rae, Dec . 12, 2009, *Globe and Mail*

Problem 3: A Lack of Diversity on Council

The current voting system also tends to create councils (and provincial legislatures and national parliaments) that do not reflect the rich diversity of our communities. In a winner-take-all system with small wards, the only candidates who win are those who appeal to a cluster of voters who happen to live close to one another in the same ward.

Let’s say young voters would like to elect more young candidates. Young voters may be a sizeable portion of all voters and deserve representation, but never elect anyone because they’re scattered evenly through all wards. Or people in various ethnic communities, or those with certain political views, may not have critical mass in many wards to elect anyone, even though they represent sizeable portions of the population.

Under the current system, whether you can elect someone depends on what you think and where you happen to live – and that’s not how democracy is supposed to work.

The Fix: Fair Voting System and Total Community Representation

A new and fairer voting system would produce the foundation for healthy representation democracy and a City Council *created by and accountable to all voters and residents of Toronto.*

Wards Need More Than One Councillor

Any voting system with just one councillor elected in each ward means that a large portion of voters in that ward, often the majority, will not be able to elect anyone. The key to democratic representation is electing a number of people in each district.

How can that be done?

The key to genuine representative democracy is having electoral districts (we usually call them wards or ridings) that elect more than one politician.

One politician simply cannot represent all voters in one district because people have many differing views. That's why most advanced democracies have electoral districts where voters can elect a number of representatives.

For example, if a ward is electing three council members, that gives voters an opportunity to elect different types of councillors. Let's say one-third of the voters want a young voice in council, and another third want someone who fights for fiscal restraint, and another third want someone who champions the environment and public transit – in this case, each group of voters would succeed in electing someone. Unlike winner-take-all, each of those viewpoints – not just one – will gain representation on council.

Multi-Councillor Wards
Rather than 44 wards with one councillor each (where many voters have elected no one), Toronto could have 15 wards with 3 councillors each, or 9 wards with 5 councillors each.

How Might a Full-Representation System Work in Toronto?

There are two general approaches. One option is to merge current wards in to larger wards, allowing voters in each to elect three, five, seven or more councillors. (The more that are elected in one district, the better, in terms of ensuring all voters can elect someone to represent their views.)

Voters would then use a ranked ballot: ranking candidates as they wished. Based on the number of seats being filled and votes cast, a quota would be set for candidates to win a seat. For example, if four council members were being elected, a candidate would need about 25% of the voters to win a seat.

Another approach is a *mixed system* in which some council members are elected to city-wide seats while others are elected in wards.

For example, one-third of seats in Council could be converted to city-wide at-large seats. Every voter would cast a vote for a local ward

City-Wide At-Large Councillors
If voters were able to elect city-wide at-large councillors, in addition to their ward councillor, almost everyone could help elect someone. The at-large councillors would add more diversity to council, and ensure a portion of council members were focused solely on citywide concerns.

councillor, as we do now. But every voter would also be able to vote for citywide at-large candidates. With approximately 15 at-large seats, any candidate supported by about seven percent of the voters would likely win a seat. This would create a rich diversity of councillors and viewpoints that are currently absent in the council chamber. Because these at-large councilors would be elected by voters all across the city, they would not be constrained by micro-issues in one ward and would be able to focus on citywide issues. Another variation, rather than citywide at-large seats, would be to divide the city into several large regions (perhaps based on the old pre-amalgamation municipalities) and have voters in each of those regions elect a number of at-large councillors, in addition to their ward councillors.

Full-Representation Voting: Benefits and Trade-Offs

Unlike citizens in most other Western democracies, Canadians are generally unfamiliar with the wide variety of voting systems that were developed and widely adopted in the 20th century to create true democratic representation. Last century, when most of the world modernized their electoral systems, Canada did not, and today we are paying the price.

Status Quo Has to Go
The current voting system is simple to understand – but it's also *simply wrong*.

The benefits of a full-representation voting system in Toronto are:

- 1) eligible voters will have more reason to vote because their votes will count
- 2) a richer diversity of candidates will be encouraged to compete and will be elected: the multi-cultural face of the city will become visible in the council chamber
- 3) elected officials will have more incentive to rise above micro-politics and micro-thinking and focus instead on addressing broader community needs such as housing, education and transportation
- 4) laws and regulations can only be passed by councilors representing the majority.

What are the trade-offs?

A new voting system may initially seem unusual or complicated and not as simple as the way we do it now. But the way we do it now is simply wrong.

Over the centuries, humankind has developed better ways of doing things – in education, health care, communications, the workplace. In almost every case, the

new and better ways are not as simple as the old approaches. But we adopt the new ways because they do a *better job* and provide *better benefits to people*.

Democracy is no different. We need to set aside antiquated political practices and replace dysfunctional systems with modern democratic alternatives. The quality of our society, communities and the environment depends on our ability to move forward.

Appendix A

Where are full representation systems used in cities?

The type of full-representation voting system most suitable for municipalities without political parties is a form of ranked balloting – the technical name is single transferable vote (STV).

- This system is currently used in all 32 municipalities in Scotland, including the major cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow.
- In Ireland, it is used in 75 town councils, 5 borough councils, 5 city councils and 29 county councils; and in Northern Ireland, in 26 city, district and borough councils.
- In New Zealand, STV is used to elect the Wellington city council, as well as those in seven other towns and districts.
- Cambridge, Massachusetts, has used STV for nearly 70 years.
- In the early part of the 20th century, two-dozen American cities used STV, including New York, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Boulder, Toledo and Sacramento. While the political machines in those cities were eventually able to reinstate winner-take-all voting (e.g., in New York, using fear of communists being elected, and in Cincinnati, fear of more African-American politicians), it did have a positive effect while used. As noted by Dr. Douglas Amy:

Proportional representation [PR]...encouraged fairer racial and ethnic representation. It produced the first Irish Catholics elected in Ashtabula, and the first Polish-Americans elected in Toledo. In Cincinnati, Hamilton, and Toledo, African-Americans had never been able to win city office until the coming of PR. Significantly, after these cities abandoned PR, African-Americans again found it almost impossible to get elected.

In Cincinnati, the number of effective votes [votes that elect someone] improved dramatically, rising from an average of 56.2% in the three pre-PR elections to an average of 90% for the 16 PR elections. Similar effects were found in other PR cities. In Cleveland, the number of effective votes increased from an average of 48.3% in the pre-PR period to an average of 79.6% during the PR period. And in New York City, the number of effective votes grew from an average of 60.6% to 79.2% with PR.

- This system was also widely adopted in Canadian cities in the first half of the twentieth century. Similar to the US experience, the new system was introduced by municipal reformers and the political establishment eventually rolled back the reforms. Among the Canadian cities that used STV: Vancouver, Victoria, Calgary, Edmonton, Lethbridge, Regina, Saskatoon, Winnipeg and 11 others.
- Because STV works well in non-party elections, it is also used by more than 150 NGOs, universities and businesses in the UK, Ireland, the US and Canada.



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