

Democracy and Voting Systems

A Single-Class Lesson Plan

Developed for Civics and Social Studies Classes

By Fair Vote Canada Volunteers



Introduction

This lesson plan has been developed to provide a flexible tool for teachers, Fair Vote Canada volunteers, and others who would like to see more discussion of democracy and voting systems in our schools.

The lesson can be delivered in a single class, or serve as the starting point for further exploration of the topic. For most volunteers, it is important that the lesson can be covered in one scheduled class period. (If you are a Fair Vote Canada volunteer, take a moment at the beginning of your presentation to introduce yourself and FVC.)

Teachers—working with or without the assistance of a volunteer—can extend the lesson with additional classroom discussion, quizzes or assignments. Optional extensions and additional resources are included at the end of this document.

How to read the lesson plan

The plan is laid out with “script” elements (such as questions for guiding discussion) as numbered points. Potential responses follow the numbered points, in bullet format. If the students do not come up with the significant responses unprompted, you can guide the discussion toward the answers you want to cover. Notes and optional topics are included in text boxes on the right side of the page.

There is a complementary presentation deck that may be used with the lesson. Slide numbers are included in the notes. Please feel free to adapt all components of the lesson plan to the facilities and equipment available to you.

I) The Mock Vote Exercise

Note: See Appendix 1 for instructions to prepare and conduct the mock vote.

Explain the mock vote *OR* let the students choose

Slide 2. As explained in the introduction, you should be prepared to run the mock vote exercise of your choice, or ask the students to choose the subject of their mock vote from among several options.

****Points 2 through 5 below only apply if you are letting the students choose.**** If you have prepared a specific exercise, please skip these points.

1. Since we're talking about voting systems today, we're going to have our own election, then use our own results to see how some different voting systems work.
2. And since we're talking about democracy, how would you like to pick the topic for our election? Here are a few ideas:
 - You could vote on:
 - what **chocolate** bar you like the most
 - what **movie** you will go see
 - what kind of **music** you are going to listen to
 - what sort of take-out **food** you will order
3. Now you get to pick the topic by a show of hands.
 - Write the results on the board (or have a student help) then announce the winner to the class.
4. You have just taken part in a *winner-take-all* election, also called *first-past-the-post* (FPTP).
 - Presenter's choice to discuss FPTP pros and cons here or wait until later. If waiting, mention that there will be more on this later.
5. Now that we have our topic, we need candidates for the ballots.
 - Ask the students to nominate *candidates* (optional: and *parties*) until you have at least four choices on the ballot.
6. This is how the election is going to work.
 - Go over the list of candidates. Describe the materials you are using for ballots, how to mark and fold the ballots. Distribute the ballots.
7. Everyone mark and fold your ballots, and X will go around to collect them.
 - Students mark and fold their ballots. Ask one or more students to collect the ballots, review and count the ballots, and calculate the percentage of the vote earned by each candidate.
 - If there is a tie for first place, you can break the tie (or ask someone else who is not a student).

You may add your own ideas or ask the students for suggestions. Make sure you have at least four choices. Write the choices on the board before the vote.

State the topics one at a time and ask for a show of hands to "vote" for that topic. Write the number of students who voted for the topic on the board as you go. (In the event of a tie, either hold a run-off or break the tie yourself.)

Some topics lend themselves to both "candidates" and "parties" (e.g. "Drake for the Rap Party" or "Tin Tin for Animated Films"), but others are best left as a list of choices (e.g. food votes).

Explain that in a real election there would be a recount if a tie or very close vote occurs.

II) Evaluating the Results of the Mock Vote

1. Looking at the numbers of votes, the winner of our election is X.
2. In Canada, all the major elections for government representatives use the *first-past-the-post* (FPTP) system that we inherited from the days of the British Empire.

What can you tell me about this system and how the results of our election would play out under FPTP?

- Possible student responses / discussion points:
 - “First past the post” gets its name from the days of horse racing, when the first horse “past the post” won the race.
 - The winner gets the prize and the other candidates get nothing. That’s why FPTP is also called a “winner take all” system.
 - Whichever candidate gets the most votes is elected and gets all the power. The winning candidate doesn’t have to have a majority (half the votes) to win.
 - Look at the results of the mock vote: did the winner have a majority of votes, or did most voters choose a candidate who won nothing?
 - If the chocolate bar vote was done, students who voted for the winning bar now receive that bar. The rest receive nothing. Explain how this reflects what actually happens in a riding, where many votes- often the majority of votes - do not elect any representation.
 - If you did the music, movies or food vote instead, explain that now everyone has to listen to only that music, watch only those types of movies, or eat only that food for four years. Ask the students what they would do if this was the case (ties in with voters tuning out).
 - If you did the chocolate bar vote, you can still discuss the example of everyone having to listen to just country music, or watch only romantic comedies for the rest of the school year.

3. In democratic countries around the world there are two major types of voting systems: *winner-take-all systems* like FPTP and *proportional systems* (also called *proportional representation* or PR).

- Possible student responses / discussion points:
 - In a proportional system, almost everybody casts a ballot that helps elect someone from the party they most want to represent them. (Relate this to the outcome of your mock vote, e.g. everyone gets the chocolate bar of their choice.)
 - Proportional representation is based on a very simple principle: “The percentage of seats a party earns in government is equal to the percentage of people that voted for them.”

Write the number of votes received by each candidate in the election beside the name of the candidate. **Hand out the winning bar to those that voted for that bar if you are using chocolate.**

Slide 3. Slide 4 after discussion.

While discussing this point, add in the percentage of the votes cast beside the number of votes received. If you are using chocolate, now hand out the chocolate bar each student voted for to every student, so everyone has a bar.

Slides 5, 6 and 7.

This means that if 30% of electors vote for Party A, Party A gets 30% of the seats in the government. If 10% vote for party B, Party B gets 10% of the seats, etc..

- About 90 democratic nations use some form of PR for their electoral system.

Using the example of music or movies, discuss how the “playlist” or “weekend movie marathon” would be divided up proportionally (using the results from your mock vote if applicable). Everyone gets something they want. Ask students to come up with other examples.

III) First-Past-the-Post Elections in Canada

1. Of course deciding which chocolate bar you want to eat or what movie you want to see is not the same as choosing who will form the government. We can decide things in class or with friends by a simple show of hands because it’s quick and easy, and there aren’t any really significant consequences.

But in real elections the future direction of our country is being decided – there are important issues like economic policy, the environment, health care, war. People vote based on their **values**, to express our feelings and opinions about things many of us care deeply about, and things that will affect our country.

Let’s take a closer look at FPTP electoral system in Canada and our real federal and provincial election outcomes.

2. “First Past the Post” is technically called a **Single Member Plurality** system.

Slides 8 and 9.

- **Single member** means that in every electoral division (usually called “ridings”) there can only be one winner to represent the entire constituency.
- **Plurality** means that the person with the most votes wins, no matter what percentage of people voted for him or her. That person does *not* need a majority of votes.
- Canada is divided up into 308 federal **ridings**, like a jigsaw puzzle. In each riding, an election is conducted on a winner-take-all basis, so the candidate with the most votes gets a seat in Parliament.
- The party with the most seats almost always gets to form the government, no matter what percentage of voters cast ballots for that party.
- If a party wins over half of the seats in Parliament, there will be a “majority” government holding 100% of the power.
- Ask students if they can think of any problems with the results generated by the FPTP system. Possible responses:

- Some ridings can be won with only a small percentage of the votes (e.g. when there are many candidates, or when there is a close three-way race).
- Sometimes a party can get a lot of votes across the country, but not many seats – or even no seats at all.
- Other parties can be “over-represented”, getting a much bigger percentage of seats than their national vote.
- Some parties can get “shut out” in some regions, even though they got a lot of votes.

3. Canada's first-past-the-post system gets blamed for some of the problems that people point out with our elections (besides the results). Have you heard of any problems or criticisms of our voting system?
 - Discuss the students' ideas.

The students might come up with some of the issues included in the next section. If that happens, just discuss these points a little early, then move on to any parts of the next section not already covered.

IV) Some Issues with Canada's First-Past-the-Post Elections

1. **Low voter turnout** (or **voter apathy**) is often talked about during our elections. Can you think of some reasons why people might choose not to vote?
 - Possible responses / discussion points:
 - In so called **safe seats** where the outcome seems certain, some people say there is no point in voting.
 - Most ballots end up having no impact on the results of the election. These are often called **wasted votes**. Why cast a ballot if it elects no-one.
 - Some people think that the party they want to support doesn't have a fair chance, but they don't want to vote for their "second choice" or just vote against a particular party.
 - Voter turn out is especially low among young people. Ask students why they think this is the case. (In the 2008 federal election only 37.4 percent of youth aged 18 to 24 voted.)
 - (Optional) Ask students if they would still vote if they know their favourite candidate had virtually no chance of winning. Why or why not?
 - (Optional) Some people think that voting is a **civic duty**; others say voting should be **mandatory** (e.g. you would be fined if you didn't vote). Ask students what they think.
2. Most people want to cast their ballot based on their values and opinions. However, with the FPTP system, voters can decide to vote strategically instead. Have you heard of **strategic voting**?
 - Strategic voting is also called **tactical voting** or **sophisticated voting**. In elections with more than two candidates who might win, a voter can cast a ballot **strategically** to support a candidate other than his or her **sincere preference** in the hope of preventing an undesirable outcome.
 - Strategic voting is more like voting against something than voting for something. Some people will go so far as to say that strategic voting is "undemocratic" or "cynical" because they believe that people should always vote sincerely.
 - (Optional) In recent elections, several organizations and websites have promoted strategic voting, but there is little evidence that these campaigns have a significant influence because voting patterns are difficult to predict.
 - Ask the students to discuss how they might have voted strategically in the mock vote. For example, a student who loves country music but knows that it doesn't have a chance of winning might vote for pop music in an attempt to prevent rap from winning. Someone who hates horror movies might vote for an action hero film, even though she would rather see a romantic comedy,

Slide 10.

3. The *close races* in a few ridings are key to winning a majority. These ridings get a lot of high-profile events and party resources. Is this good for democracy?
 - With “close races” and “safe seats” are all votes really equal?
 - Are election tactics likely to be more questionable in the “close races”?
4. (Optional) *Negative campaigns* focusing on personality instead of issues are associated with FPTP. Most voters say they don’t like negative ads, but they seem to work. What do you think?

If you have the opportunity, relate this point to the two above: electors might not bother voting in a safe seat or they might vote strategically in a close race. Where you happen to live can influence voting behaviour.

V) Actual Canadian Election Results

1. Let’s take a look at some of Canada’s federal and provincial election results to see how the First-Past-the-Post system has worked for us. These are some of the most unusual results, but you’ll see that they happen quite frequently.
2. Let’s start with our current federal government. Who knows which party now has a majority government in Canada? (Answer: the Conservative Party of Canada. Show Slide 11) Now, does anyone know the percentage of voters who cast ballots for the Conservative’s in the May 2011 election?
 - If no one knows, ask students to take some guesses. Then show slide 12. Discuss the election result.
 - At this point, some students will not get it, and may ask, “How can that be?” Most people voted for a party other than the CPC, but they get all of the power.
 - The Conservative vote increased less than 2% (from 2008) but they were able to gain an additional 23 seats, giving them a majority government.
 - It may be necessary to remind students what majority and minority mean, and repeat that Canada has 308 separate winner-take-all votes (one for each riding). The candidate with the most votes in a riding wins the seat, no matter how few or how many people wanted that party, and even when most voters wanted a different party.
 - Multiply the single-winner riding elections times 308, and sometimes a Parliament is elected that does not reflect how Canadians voted overall. Some people call this a *distorted election result* because the popular vote distribution is distorted by the FPTP system.
- In fact, it is the norm in Canada for parties to win a majority with less than 50% of the popular vote: There have only been four “true” majorities since Confederation. The last one was in 1984 when Prime Minister Mulroney’s government won 50.8% of the vote.
- Under FPTP it is actually possible for a party that does not win the popular vote to form a majority government. It happened in Quebec in 1998.
3. It isn’t just the overall results that get “distorted”. There are also some pretty extreme *regional distortions*.

Slides 11 and 12.

Slide 13: Quebec Provincial Election, 1998.

- In the 2008 federal election, both the Green Party of Canada and the Bloc Quebecois earned significant voter support (about 1 million and 1.3 million, respectively). Ask students if they can guess how many seats each party won. Show the results then ask students how this could happen. Possible responses / points of discussion:

Slide 14: The Bloc and the Greens, 2008.

- The Green Party votes were spread out across the country, but the Bloc Quebecois votes were all in Quebec.
 - If a party's support is concentrated in one *geographical* area (especially if it is *issue-based* support), it can win a lot of seats. But, if a party appeals to the voters across the whole nation based on *values*, it is difficult to make a breakthrough and gain seats in Parliament.
 - FPTP is a system that makes it hard for new national parties to get started, but actually makes it easier for new regional parties or splinter groups to get established (e.g. the Reform Party was strong in Canada's western provinces in the 1990s).
 - In general, the FPTP system works in favour of larger well-established parties. Fairly proportional results are usually achieved under FPTP only when there is a two-party system.
4. FPTP works best when it produces a majority government with a strong and effective opposition. Minority governments – where the governing party has less than half the seats but works with the support of another party (or parties) can also be very effective.

- (Optional) Both of Lester B. Pearson's governments were minorities and he is often thought of as one of our most successful prime ministers.
- Sometimes, however, FPTP results in a government with a very *weak opposition*, or even no opposition at all. Ask: Why would this be a problem? Possible responses:

Slide 15: New Brunswick Sweep

- No one to criticize the government and hold it accountable.
- Can affect the functioning of government committees (bringing different perspectives to policy decisions, new legislation, etc.).
- No opportunity for other parties to build a "government in waiting"; can affect their ability to offer a viable alternative in future elections.

5. To finish off this section, let's look a bit further back. Maybe some of you have the idea that people are complaining just because they don't like the Conservative Party. Well, during the 1990s many Conservatives were complaining about FPTP when it was benefiting the Liberals, who won three majorities in a row with less than 50% of the votes cast.

Slide 16: General Election, 1993.

There are members of all political parties who support electoral reform in Canada. However, it is not usually a priority for the party in power because they are benefiting from distorted results.

VI) Comparing FPTP and Proportional Representation

Note: Appendix 2 contains a list of pros and cons of both systems. You may wish to generate such a list with your students.

1. Let's look at how the seats in Parliament would look, comparing the actual winner-take-all FPTP system to a proportional system.

- Ask students to look at the first slide and tell you what they notice. Possible responses:
 - One party wins a lot more seats with FPTP.
 - PR seems to “even things out” – the bigger winners under FPTP have a bit less and the small parties have a few more seats but the distribution has a similar shape.
 - PR gives more power to smaller parties.
- Ask students to look at the second slide and tell you what they notice. Possible responses:
 - The smaller parties have more members under PR. Where do they come from?
 - The dominant party “loses” members
 - Remind students that under PR the number of seats each party wins reflects the percentage of the popular vote each earned.

Slides 17 and 18: General Election, 2011. (Or write out the number of seats under the two scenarios.)

Students might ask how PR elections work (this is outlined in the next section). You may have to explain that the PR numbers are an approximation; electoral reform would likely require some changes to the riding distribution and/or the total number of seats.

2. Under PR, it is unusual for one party to get a majority, so coalitions are the usual way of forming a government. Coalitions tend to be long term and stable. Policies are created by the coalition representing the majority, so cooperation is essential. It is not often in the interests of a coalition partner to force an election before the end of the term.

- There are a few countries using PR that have a history of unstable governments. This is a very small minority of the nations using PR, but it is often used as an argument against changing FPTP (usually by those who gain power through FPTP).
- Ask students: What do you think would be different in Canada if we had a proportional system?
 - Who would hold power? (there should be a more diverse Parliament)
 - What laws would be passed? (there would likely be more cooperation)
 - Would more people vote?

3. There are several different PR systems. Some use candidate lists prepared by the parties or voted on by the people. Some keep the ridings and add additional members. Some have larger districts with several representatives, elected proportionately. Which system would be best for Canada is a topic for another day.

Note: Appendix 3 contains an optional exercise examining different types of PR.

- 4. Do you think we should change the voting system in Canada? How would we do it? What would be the challenges?

Show slide 19 (last slide) at the end of your presentation.

Appendix 1: The Chocolate Bar Vote

Preparation and Materials, Conducting the Vote

Selecting the topic of the mock vote

Before delivering the lesson, the presenter must decide what type of mock vote will be conducted. The “Chocolate Bar Vote” included in the lesson plan is one option. There are several others to choose among. Students could vote on their favourite type of movie or musical genre, their favourite snack food, take-out meal or what they like on a pizza. You may even want to make up a version of your own.

Whatever the subject of the mock vote, make sure that there are at least four “candidates” for the election, for example:

Chocolate Bars: Aero, Coffee Crisp, Kit Kat, Smarties (based on nut-free combination pack)

Movies: Action, Comedy, Musical, Documentary, Drama (name individual current movies for each category)

Music: Blues, Country, Pop, Rap / Hip Hop, R&B / Soul, Rock (popular artists can be nominated as candidates for each “party”/genre)

Take-out: Burgers, Chinese, Pizza, Pita wraps, Subs, Sushi, etc. (choose locally appropriate options or ask students to nominate their favourite local take-out restaurants)

Let the students choose

Another option is to ask the students to choose the subject of the mock vote. Offering several topics to choose among may engage the students more effectively. The choice can be made by a “show of hands”. This option will also provide an opportunity to discuss first-past-the-post systems before the mock vote, with discussion of more proportional systems following the mock vote.

Preparing Your Materials

The most significant preparation required is for running the mock vote, but this can be as simple or complicated as you want to make it. If you are letting the students select the type of vote and nominate the candidates, all you will require are slips of paper for recording the students’ choices. Post-it notes which can be folded and sealed make good ballots.

Other presenters may want to prepare for a specific type of mock vote, bring in chocolate bars, movie posters or music CDs to support the lesson, and prepare realistic-looking ballots for the vote. Whatever type of vote you choose, prepare all the materials you will need to conduct the mock vote.

Where available, ask for the results of the most recent student mock vote. During federal and provincial elections, many high schools conduct a student vote. The student results are often very different from the votes cast in the actual election. This data can fuel the discussion of the pros and cons of the different voting systems.

Decide the number of options the students will be able to choose from on their ballots.

1. We suggest a minimum of four. In many Canadian ridings, voters will have a choice of Conservative, Liberal, NDP, Green, and Independent. In Quebec, they will also be able to choose Bloc. In many ridings, they may also be able to vote for even smaller parties, such as the Pirate Party, which is a popular choice among youth. Student Vote and national polling of those 18-30 shows that youth are much more likely to vote for smaller parties.

2. Make up a ballot for each student that looks something like this. You can make one that looks more like a formal Elections Canada ballot if you choose.

Place an X by the Chocolate Bar of Your Choice. You can only vote for one.

Kit Kat
Smarties
Aero
Coffee Crisp

3. Buy enough Halloween size chocolate bars to cover every possible outcome. (If you have a class of 25 kids, and four options on the ballot, you will need at least 25 of each bar to cover the remote possibility that all 25 kids choose the same bar. You can save the leftover bars for your next class).

4. Place your ballots on the students' desks or hand them out as the students come in.

Conducting the Vote

1. State that this exercise gives students hands-on experience of the two basic types of systems in the world: "Winner Take All" and "Proportional"

2. Ask them to fill out the ballot, but not show anyone else their selection.

3. Collect the ballots and ask a teaching assistant or student helper to quickly calculate:

a) The number of students that voted for each chocolate bar, and

b) The percentage of students that voted for each chocolate bar

4. Write the results prominently on the board . For example, in a class of 25, with just 4 choices, you may get a result like:

Kit Kat: 9 (36%)

Aero: 7 (28%)

Smarties: 3 (12%)

Coffee Crisp: 6 (24%)

5. Circle the chocolate bar with the most votes. Ask people who voted for that chocolate bar to raise their hands. Give each of those students the chocolate bar they voted for.

Continue to discussion of the first-past-the-post system.

Appendix 2: Pros and Cons of PR and FPTP

First Past the Post “Pros”	First Past the Post “Cons”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple to understand • Based on traditional British Parliamentary system • Can produce strong majority governments that can make decisions and “get things done” • Decisions may be made more quickly with a single party majority government because the government does not need to negotiate/compromise • Works best with a two-party system, because in this case the government was actually elected by the majority 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over ½ of Canadians’ votes have no impact (“wasted votes”) • Youth votes most likely to be wasted, contributing to very low youth voter turnout • Overall, a 10% lower voter turnout than PR countries • “Majority” governments with all the power are routinely elected with less than half of the votes • Very low percentage of women and minority representatives • Distorted results where numbers of seats do not reflect popular vote • Adversarial system, non-cooperative
Proportional Representation “Pros”	Proportional Representation Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Almost every voter casts a “sincere” ballot that elects someone they prefer • More small parties will exist • Research shows PR countries on average are just as stable (in terms of election frequency) as FPTP countries* • Decisions are made by a coalition of the majority, through cooperation, negotiation and compromise. This may mean it takes longer to create policy, but research shows voters like the policies created better, even when their party of choice is not part of the government. • Proportional representation alone has no effect either way on economic performance.* • The PR systems most appropriate for Canada balance representation by where you live with representation by values • Higher voter turnout • Parliament reflects distribution of the popular vote • Parliament looks more like the general population (more reflective mix of women, minorities, young and old) <p data-bbox="253 1667 802 1745">*Even Italy, which PR critics point out as dysfunctional, has had fewer elections than Canada in the last 40 years.</p> <p data-bbox="253 1755 802 1864">*A landmark study comparing 36 countries over 25 years showed no difference on average in economic performance between FPTP and PR countries. The particular government, culture, and</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ballot itself is more complicated than what we have now • More small parties will exist • Parliament in proportion to their share of the vote • People think coalitions mean we will have more elections • Decisions may take longer, as parties must work together – employing negotiation and compromise - to create policies • People think “Proportional representation is bad for the economy.”

economic forces have more to do with economic performance than the electoral system used. The strongest economic countries in Europe, like Germany, use PR, as do the weakest countries, and countries in between	
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Appendix 3: Lesson Extensions

1. Explore the various types of proportional systems, including how they work, where they are used and some of the “pros and cons” of each.
 - Types of PR systems include: closed list PR, open list PR, single transferable vote (STV), and mixed member proportional (MMP) (also called additional member system)
 - Resources:
 - The New Zealand electoral commission has a YouTube channel with a number of easy-to-understand video clips explaining the electoral systems considered during the country’s electoral reform process. See: <http://www.youtube.com/user/ReferendumNZ>
 - The UK’s Electoral Reform Society has a website that provides an overview of several types of voting systems, listing where they are used and pros and cons for each. See: <http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/voting-systems>
2. Explore international voting systems, including how they work, where they are used and how the system was selected.
 - Either in-class (if computers and Internet access are available) or as an assignment, ask students to select a country and prepare a brief report on its electoral system.
 - This can be done as a group exercise and may include a presentation and discussion component.
 - Wikipedia lists the countries using proportional representation on its “Proportional representation” page
3. Investigate an attempt at electoral reform in Canada or internationally.
 - Four referenda on electoral reform in Canada have all failed (B.C. twice, Ontario, and P.E.I). Explore why this happened. Consider what is needed for successful electoral reform to happen in Canada.
 - Research the successful electoral reform process recently conducted in New Zealand. Why did it work? Are there lessons for Canada?
4. Use “Electoral Reform” as the topic for a debate (either as a follow-up to this lesson or when studying debating).
 - Suggested question: “Whereas Canada’s current First-Past-the-Post” electoral system produces distorted results which are not good for our democracy, be it resolved that Canada should adopt a form of proportional representation.”
5. The Fair Vote Canada website has a section of resources for teachers, including a complete curriculum unit on Democracy and Voting Systems. See: <http://www.fairvote.ca/en/resource-materials-for-teachers>.