



Fair Vote Canada **Représentation équitable au Canada**

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Fair Vote Canada?

Fair Vote Canada (FVC) is a multi-partisan citizens' campaign for voting system reform. It promotes the introduction of an element of proportional representation for elections at all levels of government, federal, provincial and municipal. With over 55,000 supporters, 34 Chapters and teams across the country, an Advisory Board of prominent Canadians and a coalition of civil society partners, Fair Vote Canada is building one of the biggest democratic reform movements in Canadian History.

What is proportional representation?

Proportional representation is any voting system designed to produce a representative body (like a parliament, legislature, or council) in which the number of seats is proportional to the share of votes obtained by each representative or party. PR can be implemented in different ways. One finds all sorts of approaches being used in different countries.

Does Fair Vote Canada advocate for any particular PR system?

Fair Vote Canada has chosen not to advocate for any particular PR system. However it recognizes the need to find a PR formula that is well adapted to the particular traditions, circumstances and political realities of our country. We call this a “made in Canada” solution.

Small countries sometimes elect all of their MPs by voting for party lists at the national level. This is called list-PR or “pure” PR. Each party then gets a number of seats from the party list depending upon their share of the vote.

However, nobody is calling for a model like that in Canada. Whatever approach is recommended for Canada has to take into account that Canada is a large and diversified country with a tradition of electing MPs to represent particular geographical ridings and regions. A functional PR system in Canada would need to be regionally-based in some way.

So how would this be different from what we have now?

Canada's Parliament and provincial legislatures all use the first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system, where each riding has only one winner, and the candidate with the most votes wins. This system is not proportional because only one candidate can be elected and voters who vote for someone else lose their right to representation by the representative of their choice. Losses by a party in one riding tend to be compensated by wins elsewhere but the overall result in terms of seats in the legislature is usually far different from what voters have called for when casting their votes.

What's wrong with the candidate with the most votes winning?

With just one winner in each riding, half of Canadian voters don't actually elect anyone, and our Parliaments and legislatures don't actually look anything like us. In the words of French philosopher Ernest Naville (1865), "In a democratic government, the right of decision belongs to the majority, but the right of representation belongs to all."

How serious is this issue? Isn't Canada one of the best democracies in the world?

In 2011, the votes of seven million Canadian voters elected no one.¹ Conservative voters in Quebec, New Democrats in Saskatchewan, Liberals in Alberta, and Greens everywhere in Canada all deserve to be represented by someone they voted for. Each of Canada's regions is actually much more diverse than our voting system suggests.

It's an election. Doesn't someone have to lose?

It is normal for candidates and parties to lose, but all voters deserve to be represented by a candidate of their choice and all votes should count to elect someone. In their 2011 election, under a PR electoral system, 97% of New Zealand voters cast a vote that elected someone to represent them. In Canada, less than 51% of us did so.²

Would PR make our political system more unstable?

Actually, countries with PR systems are not more unstable than Canada. Looking at it from the point of view of how often a country goes to the polls, Canada is actually the most unstable of the major democracies, with 21 elections since World War II compared to 17 in Italy, a country normally considered to be particularly unstable.

In Canada, we keep flip-flopping between unstable minorities and false majority governments (a majority of seats without a majority of the vote) led by different parties, as a result of our first-past-the-post system. These shifting sands make it difficult for government to address the country's long-term priorities.

One of the major factors leading to instability in Canada is the sensitivity of our electoral system to small differences or shifts in voter preferences. In Ontario's 2011 election,³ the Liberals got only 1.9% more votes than the Conservatives (37.7% vs. 35.5%), but won 49% of the seats to the Conservatives' 35%. In 2014, the Liberal share of the vote increased by only 1 percentage point to 38.7%, but this sufficed to vault them from a minority position to a strong majority position.

In Prince Edward Island, provincial elections results have typically been extraordinarily disproportional, with virtually absolute power swinging back and forth between the Liberals or the Conservatives. Since 1989, only one provincial legislature out of seven has had more than five opposition MPPs in the house.⁴

When relatively small changes in poll numbers spell the difference between oblivion and absolute power, it's no wonder our politicians seem to be in perpetual, confrontational campaign mode.

Under PR, a 2% change in the popular vote would mean just: a 2% change in the share of seats. Politicians would have a much greater incentive to get down to work on our country's long-term priorities, rather than playing "gotcha" to tweak the poll numbers and spark yet another election. Minority or coalition governments would be characterized by cooperation and compromise, not confrontation and instability.

¹ <http://wastedvotes.ca/?q=node/2/Federal/LATEST/0/TOP>

² <http://wastedvotes.ca/?q=node/2/Federal/LATEST/0/TOP>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Ontario_general_elections.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_post-confederation_Prince_Edward_Island_general_elections

Won't this mean constant coalition governments?

PR does tend to produce coalition government, but this is not necessarily a bad thing. The fact is that governments formed under *any* voting system represent coalitions of different groups who negotiate and make deals. That's the way democracy works.

Each of Canada's "big tent" parties is already a coalition of internal factions which are generally hidden from public view except during leadership races. They compete with one another and then negotiate and compromise on the party platform and policies.

What changes under PR is that such coalitions generally involve more than one party. Although Canadians are unfamiliar with coalitions, coalitions offer some considerable advantages. For one thing, they are more transparent: negotiations among parties are generally much more visible to the public than those that currently take place within parties; and the compromises that are made are publicly known. What is more, when elections are more proportional, the resulting coalition or governing group represents a true majority of voters. Minority governments and false majority governments do not.

Won't parties multiply like rabbits?

New parties might form and old ones might restructure when faced with the realities and opportunities of a proportional system. However, based on experience elsewhere, the number of new parties that might form and be able to win seats at the polls under a PR system in Canada is likely to be quite limited.

The reasons for this are easy to understand. One reason is that voters themselves want to support parties with the heft to have an impact on policy. Small parties tend to receive only small fractions of the vote.

All electoral systems also have some sort of threshold that must be achieved before a party wins a seat. To understand how this is likely to work in Canada's case, we need to understand how the size of electoral districts come into play. The single-member district is the one we have now. It is not proportional, and small parties stand virtually no chance of being elected. The introduction of PR makes it easier for smaller parties to win election. However, even under PR, there are some constraints. By way of example, the share of the vote required to win a seat in a PR-based electoral region of 15 seats would be a little over 6%. So while the threshold for a small party to win a seat would be lower under a PR system, it remains fairly significant. Very small parties would find it almost as hard to win seats as they do now.

What effect might PR have on national unity?

PR should be good for national unity. Canada's current voting system disproportionately rewards regional parties, or national parties that are regionally focused. A million votes concentrated in one region of the country will gain a party far more seats than a million voters earned from coast to coast to coast (Think of the Bloc Québécois compared to the Green Party). So, all else being equal, we end up with parties that dominate certain regions of the country while having little or no representation outside those strongholds. Government and opposition caucuses seldom have strong representation from all parts of the country.

When elections are proportional, all geographic regions usually have representation both in the government and opposition benches. Because every voter is equal, regions generally elect candidates from all parties, unlike our current system where one party often dominates each region.

Do Canadians really care about this?

Our democracy is an exercise in frustration for millions of Canadians from all parties and regions who realize that voting for our conscience in our home riding won't elect anyone. Many of us vote strategically for someone who is not our first choice, and many more of us don't vote at all. Voters are increasingly cynical and discouraged about our political system, and voter turnout is dropping, particularly among youth.⁵ The Aboriginal population in Canada feels it has no incentive to vote.

From 2001 to 2013, polls have repeatedly shown that around 70% of Canadians believe that the portion of seats a party wins in the House of Commons should reflect the portion of the votes they receive.⁶ One need only engage in conversation with ordinary Canadians to find how passionately many of them believe in the need for PR.

What about representation of women and minorities?

Less than a quarter of Canada's parliamentarians are women. That places Canada 54th in the world, well behind Angola, Belarus, Iraq, South Sudan, and Afghanistan.⁷ Some countries set aside a certain number of seats for women. But among those that elect the most women without such quotas are those that use proportional representation.

As for visible minorities, including the Aboriginal community in Canada, they hold relatively few seats in Canada, despite the fact that they are a growing segment of society.

When parties can only put forward one candidate per riding, they will naturally nominate the candidate that they think is strongest. As political scientist Alan Renwick puts it, "As long as there are even subconscious biases in our society about who makes the best MP, white men will be overrepresented."⁸ Under PR, each party could put forward a representative range of candidates in multi-member districts, and voters would have a greater range of candidates to choose from.

How many countries use proportional representation?

More than 90 countries around the world use PR to elect their national assemblies. Out of the world's 35 most robust democracies, 25 use PR.⁹ This includes most European countries, and all Latin American countries. Most countries with PR have used it for decades. Countries putting democratic systems in place for the first time or attempting to renew their democracy through electoral reform virtually never opt for a system like Canada's.

⁵ Elections Canada. "Voter Turnout at Federal Elections and Referendums."

<http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=ele&dir=turn&document=index&lang=e>.

⁶ Day, Wilfred. 2011. "Poll results on Canadian public support for proportional representation".

<http://wilfdays.blogspot.com/2011/01/poll-results-on-canadian-public-support.html>.

⁷ Interparliamentary Union. "Women in national parliaments". <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>.

⁸ Renwick, Alan. 2011. "The Alternative Vote: A Briefing Paper". Political Studies Association, University of Reading. p.17. <http://www.fairvote.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/TheAlternativeVoteBriefingPaper.pdf>.

⁹ www.fairvote.org/reforms/fair-representation-voting/PR-in-most-robust-democracies/.

How would the Mixed-Member Proportional (MMP) system work?

In Mixed-Member Proportional (MMP) systems like they have in Scotland, Wales, Germany, and New Zealand, voters vote for their individual local representatives the way we do, but also cast a separate second vote to elect “top-up” regional MPs to ensure proportionality in each region. In the “open list” version recommended by the Law Commission of Canada,¹⁰ the top-up seats for each party are distributed as a function of votes received by each candidate.

MMP offers Canadian new opportunities for dialogue with one’s MP about their concerns, by interacting with one’s local MP or any one of the regional MPs. This might allow constituents a better hearing than what they might currently receive from MPs in safe ridings with little competition. In Germany, they refer to MMP as “personalized proportional representation.”

Wouldn’t this model give too much power to political parties?

Some people don’t like the “closed list” approach to MMP that was put forward for consideration in the 2007 Ontario referendum, because the top-up ballot would have been for party lists of candidates ranked ahead of time by the parties. To the extent that Canadians are concerned about this, the solution would be to use an open-list MMP system in which all candidates face the voters, rather than a closed-list one. PR systems can be designed to ensure a maximum of voter choice.

Is there a danger that small parties would have too much power?

Small parties have a role to play in representing minority views, but there is no reason to believe that these parties would enjoy a disproportionate amount of power. For one thing, it will remain somewhat harder for small parties to win seats in the sort of moderately proportionate system of the sort that Canada is most likely to put in place. Furthermore, any major party that accepted to adopt an agenda that is too far out-of-step with its own support base would likely be punished for it at the next election.

On the other hand, when two or more like-minded parties that together represent a majority of voters agree to form a coalition focusing on areas of policy agreement, that often indicates majority public support for those policies, and the coalition is simply giving the majority what they want. Research has shown that coalition governments tend to be better than single-party governments at producing legislation in line with public thinking.¹¹

If you want multi-member ridings, doesn’t that mean having to increase the number of politicians?

Proportional systems don’t require more politicians. All they do is regroup politicians into multi-member districts. This allows the voter, to have a say on the composition of the resulting group of representatives. In this way, voters may vote differently, but all have a say in electing who will represent their views.

¹⁰ Law Commission of Canada. 2004. “Voting Counts: Electoral Reform for Canada”. Available at <http://www.fairvote.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Law-Commission-of-Canada-Report.pdf>.

¹¹ www.fairvote.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Why-PR-Review-of-Evidence-updated-version-2015-03-17.pdf. More details at http://www.fairvote.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Lijphart_summary1.pdf.

How would the Single Transferable Vote (STV) work?

In the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system used in Ireland, India's upper house, and parts of Australia (the senate and two states), voters in multi-member districts get to elect five, six, or seven representatives instead of just one. In voting for the candidate of their choice, they can rank candidates by preference. This ranking can be done across party lines if voters wish.

STV ensures that no vote is wasted. If your favourite candidate is eliminated because they don't have enough votes to get elected, your vote is transferred to your next-favourite candidate based on the other preferences expressed in your vote. Similarly, if your first choice candidate has more votes than they need, the surplus will also be redistributed. This system gives voters the maximum amount of choice and leads to an electoral result that is aligned with those choices. Every voter gets an equal impact on the outcome, and can vote their conscience without wasting their vote or having to worry about vote-splitting.

STV is what was recommended by the BC Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform and put to a provincial referendum in 2005.¹² Remarkably, 58% of British Columbia voters voted "Yes" to STV provincially. Unfortunately, the BC government decided that a vote of at least 60% was required for the PR option to win. Ironically, that same government had won 97% of the seats and 100% of the power in 2001, with just 57% of the vote.

Why don't we just rank candidates in our existing riding?

Understood simply as a type of ballot, preferential ballots allow voters to rank their preferences for different candidates, 1, 2, 3.... This feature can be used as part of an instant runoff-process to ensure that if voters' first choices don't elect anyone because no candidate has obtained a majority, their second or third choices may be used instead. Preferential ballots can be used in single-member or multi-member ridings.

The use of preferential ballots in single-winner ridings gives you a system called the Alternative Vote (AV), or Instant Runoff Voting. But so long as there's only one winner in a riding, voters who did not cast their first choice for the winning candidate will still not elect the candidate that best represents them, and results are not proportional. Candidates from underrepresented parties would usually be eliminated in the second or third round of counting, in favour of larger parties.¹³

The Alternative Vote system (AV) is not a proportional system and would not fill Canada's democratic deficit. If Canadians wish to rank candidates by order of preference, they should insist on doing so in the context of a PR system. All that is required is to apply preferential ballots in multi-member ridings. This can be done in different ways.

- Stéphane Dion has proposed a system that he calls "[P3](#)." The name P3 stands for Preferential, Proportional and Personal.
- Another option is the Single Transferable Vote (STV), a model that received 58% support in the first BC referendum in 2005.

¹² BC had produced an excellent video to explain this system. It remains one of the best videos on the subject. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-4_yuK-K-k.

¹³ If you'd like more information on AV, see Fair Vote Canada's position paper on AV titled "The Alternative Vote (or Instant Run-off Voting): It's No Solution for the Democratic Deficit" (www.fairvote.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/AV-backgrounder-august2009_1.pdf) and independent sites like <http://www.no2av.ca>.

- Yet another option might be an adaptation of MMP that includes preferential ballots for the local seats. As originally proposed, this idea was called AV+ and it was only moderately proportional because the number of top-up seats was small, but there is no reason that this approach could not be as proportional as any other version of MMP. [FVC has produced a video on this topic](#) for the 2015 election current campaign.

If PR would be such an improvement, why don't we have it already? Wasn't PR rejected by voters in different referendums a few years back?

The simple answer to these questions is a political one. However much a political party may believe in PR when it is in the opposition, the political party in power has found its power to be increased thanks to our first-past-the-post system. In most cases, it is enjoying the power that comes with a false majority or a substantially larger majority than would otherwise be the case. So, the party in power is not inclined to change the system.

There have been several instances where the leader of the party remains true to promises made when in opposition after taking power, but finds the party's caucus to be divided on the issue. Our political history is full of examples in Prince Edward Island, Quebec, Ontario, and BC, of politicians who advocated for PR when in opposition but changed their minds or failed to deliver on it once elected with a false majority. Referendums may not be the best way to bring about a change such as this when the party bringing the referendum forward is itself divided about PR and may not invest in the sort of public education that would be needed to help citizens to understand what is at stake.

PR will not come about unless political conditions are ripe for it. FVC believes that the conditions are ripe going into the 2015 election, and invites Canadians to seize that opportunity and make 2015 the last unfair election.

What would it take to change our electoral system?

Most countries engaging in electoral reform do so by an act of legislation. Canada's voting system can be changed through a simple majority vote in Parliament. No constitutional amendment is needed!