



Fair Vote Canada Représentation équitable au Canada

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Fair Vote Canada? Fair Vote Canada (FVC) is a grassroots multi-partisan citizens' campaign for voting system reform. We promote the introduction of an element of proportional representation into elections for all levels of government and throughout civil society.

What is proportional representation? Proportional representation is any voting system designed to produce a representative body (like a parliament, legislature, or council) where voters elect representatives in proportion to our votes.

Isn't that 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.

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. We believe that "[i]n a democratic government, the right of decision belongs to the majority, but the right of representation belongs to all." (Ernest Naville, 1865)

How bad can it be? In 2011, the votes of seven million Canadian voters elected no one.¹ Conservatives in Quebec, New Democrats in Saskatchewan, Liberals in Alberta, and all Greens (not just the 5% of them in one riding) 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? Candidates and parties can lose, but voters never should. In their 2011 election, 97% of New Zealand voters cast a vote that elected someone to represent them. In Canada, less than 51% of us did.²

Won't this cause instability, constant elections, and endless minority governments? Since Italy reformed its voting system in the 1990s, Canada is actually now the most unstable of the major democracies, with twenty-one elections since World War II to Italy's seventeen. We keep flip-flopping between false majority governments (a majority of seats without a majority of the vote) and unstable minorities at the expense of our country's long-term priorities, and our voting system is largely to blame... In Ontario's 2011 election, just 2% separated the two leading parties, but one got 49% of the seats while the other got just 35%. In Prince Edward Island, 40% of the vote gets you just 19% of the seats. But bump that up to 50%, and your party sweeps to a dominant 81% majority. 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. In proportional representation, a 2% change in the polls would mean just a 2% change in seats. Politicians would have much more 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 governments could mean cooperation and compromise, not confrontation and instability.

¹ www.wastedvotes.ca. "2011 Election for the Federal Government of Canada".

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

² www.wastedvotes.ca. "2011 Election for the Federal Government of Canada".

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

Won't this mean constant coalition governments? Governments formed under any voting system are 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.

When elections are more proportional, such coalitions generally involve more than one party. While Canadians have been taught to fear this, it actually has a few enormous advantages. Negotiations among parties are generally much more visible to the public than those that currently take place within parties, and the compromises are publicly known. When elections are more proportional, the resulting coalition or governing group represents a true majority of voters.

Won't this allow extremists to get elected? In our current system, vote splitting has allowed MPs to be elected with as little as 29% of the vote in their riding. By contrast, in Germany's proportional MMP system, parties need to have a certain percentage of the nationwide popular vote before they're allowed even one seat. In STV, every single candidate has to earn a certain minimum number of votes to be elected. Most candidates win by earning votes transferred from other candidates from across the political spectrum, ensuring diverse voices with broad support.

Won't parties multiply like rabbits? Indeed, new parties might form and old ones might restructure when they finally have to reflect the range of viewpoints in Canada. Voters won't be forced into broad-tent parties to make their vote count, as conservatives of different stripes, libertarians, and others are now. But history shows that the introduction of elements of proportionality will likely only marginally increase 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. In some PR countries, parties are required to get 4-5% of the national popular vote before they're allowed to hold a seat. Regional models like Scotland's have similar natural thresholds built in.

Won't this damage national unity? Canada's current voting system overrewards regional parties, or national parties that focus on a specific region of the country. A million votes concentrated in one region of the country will gain a party far more seats than the support of a million voters earned from coast to coast to coast. So naturally, we end up with parties that unfairly dominate certain regions of the country, with little or no representation for their voters outside their strongholds. Government and opposition caucuses seldom have strong representation from all parts of the country.

Representing differences is at the core of democracy. Surely, exaggerating them is not.

When elections are more 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 enough people really think there's a problem? Millions of us (from all parties and regions) realize that voting our conscience in our home riding won't elect anyone. Many of us vote for someone we don't really like, and many more of us don't vote at all. Voter turnout in Canada is dropping.³

Since 2001, polls have repeatedly shown that a strong majority of Canadians (around 70%) believed that the portion of seats a party wins in the House of Commons should reflect the portion of the votes they receive. A February 2010 Environics Research poll showed that this is still true. It found that 68 per cent of decided Canadians support "moving towards a system of proportional representation (PR) in Canadian elections."⁴

³ Elections Canada. "Voter Turnout at Federal Elections and Referendums".

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

⁴ Day, Wilfred. 2011. "Poll results on Canadian public support for proportional representation".

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

What about representation of women and minorities? Less than a quarter of Canada's parliamentarians are women. That's barely enough to rank 54th in the world⁵, well behind Angola, Belarus, Iraq, South Sudan, and Afghanistan. Some countries set aside a certain number of seats for women. But those that elect the most women without such quotas use proportional representation. In Canada, visible minorities also hold relatively few seats, despite being a growing segment of society. Very few Aboriginal people serve in Parliament. When parties can only put forward one candidate per riding, they will naturally nominate the candidate that they think is strongest. "As long as there are even subconscious biases in our society about who makes the best MP, white men will be overrepresented."⁶ But when each voter has a say over more than one seat, parties will put forward a more representative range of candidates to earn the votes of a diverse population, and voters will indeed take them up on it.

Who actually uses proportional representation? 81 countries use elements of proportionality when electing their national assembly, including most long-term democracies, most European countries, and most of the major nations of the Americas. Most of these have used it for decades. New countries almost never opt for a system like Canada's when setting up their first democratic voting system.

So this is what I really want to know... how would it work? (Mixed-Member Proportional (MMP) edition) 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. In the "open list" version recommended by the Law Commission of Canada⁷, the top regional vote-getters from underrepresented parties fill top-up seats until those parties' share of seats reflects their share of the popular vote.

Wouldn't we be giving all our power away to political parties? Some people didn't like the "closed list" MMP system put forward in the 2007 Ontario referendum because voters' second votes would have been for parties, not individual candidates, with top-up seats filled from lists determined by party members. It's worth remembering that in today's elections, party candidates are selected by party members, too, and not by the 99% of Canadians who aren't party members. By the time they face the voters in their riding, each candidate is effectively a one-candidate closed party list. But even "closed list" MMP offers every Canadian a much better chance of being represented than our current system. After an election, you could take an issue to your local MP or one of your diverse regional MPs. Today, many MPs occupy safe seats. But they might start listening up if they knew you could actually take your business elsewhere. In Germany, they call this "personalized proportional representation." If you're still worried about giving parties too much power, you may want to consider "open list" MMP (as recommended by the Law Commission of Canada)⁸, or the Single Transferable Vote (STV).

Won't small parties have all the power? Won't the "tail wag the dog"? Any major party "blackmailed" into adopting an agenda out-of-step with its own support base will be severely punished at the next election. On the other hand, when two or more like-minded parties, who 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. That's more like the dog choosing the tail that fits. Research has indeed shown that coalition governments tend to be better than single-party governments at producing legislation more in line with public thinking.

⁵ Interparliamentary Union. "Women in national parliaments". <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>

⁶ Renwick, Alan. 2011. "The Alternative Vote: A Briefing Paper". Political Studies Association, University of Reading. p.17. Available at <http://www.fairvote.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/TheAlternativeVoteBriefingPaper.pdf>

⁷ 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>

⁸ 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>

So this is what I really want to know... how would it work? (Single Transferable Vote (STV) edition) In the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system used in Ireland, India (upper house), and two state houses and the national senate in Australia, voters in combined local districts get to elect five, six, or seven representatives instead of just one, ranking individual local politicians from all parties by order of preference.

STV does everything it can to make sure your vote isn't wasted. If your favourite candidate doesn't have enough votes to get elected, your vote is transferred to your next-favourite candidate, and so on. In that case, voting for a shoo-in candidate might seem like a waste if it meant your other choices didn't get in (remember, you've got only one vote to use to elect five or six people). But the truly great thing about STV (and one thing that sets it apart from the Alternative Vote, which is not proportional) is that if your favourite candidate has more votes than he or she needs, your vote is similarly transferred to your next-favourite candidate, and so on, until it ends up where it's most needed to get you the group of representatives you want. Every voter gets an equal impact on the outcome, and can vote their conscience without wasting their vote. Every politician is elected with equally broad support, and none can benefit from vote-splitting. Importantly, results are proportional. STV was recommended by the BC Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform. In a 2005 referendum, 58% of British Columbia voters voted "Yes" to STV for provincial elections. Unfortunately, the BC government decided that 60% was required for legitimacy. Ironically, that same government had won 97% of the seats and 100% of the power with just 57% of the vote.

Does Fair Vote Canada advocate for a particular system? Fair Vote Canada advocates for voting systems that are designed to produce a representative body (like a parliament, legislature, or council) where seats are more or less in proportion to votes cast. While 81 countries use proportional representation systems, local circumstances have created unique variations. Canadians deserve to learn from these experiences to create a world-class, uniquely Canadian proportional voting system that minimizes wasted votes and reflects who we are and what we actually vote for. Fair Vote Canada does not support the Alternative Vote system (AV) because it's not proportional.

If you want more than one winner in a riding, doesn't that mean so many more politicians? Proportional systems don't require more politicians. They simply allow you, the voter, to have a say over the occupant of more than one seat. You and your neighbour may vote differently, but we think you both deserve to elect someone. Don't you?

Why don't we just rank candidates in our existing riding? Ranking candidates in single-winner ridings is called the Alternative Vote, or Instant Runoff Voting. The Alternative Vote is not a proportional system. As long as there's only one winner in a riding, many (often most) voters in that riding simply do not elect the candidate that best represents them, and nationwide results are not proportional. Ranking candidates wouldn't change this. As nice as it might be to rank them first on your ballot sheet, candidates of currently underrepresented parties would simply get eliminated in the second or third round of counting, in favour of larger parties. Studies show that 95-98% of the time, we would get the same winners as we do now. If you'd like more information, check out Fair Vote Canada's position paper on AV⁹ and independent sites like www.no2av.ca. If you like ranking candidates, please, go proportional by doing it in multi-member ridings. Try Single Transferable Vote (STV).

How can the system actually be changed, and what is Fair Vote Canada doing about it? Canada's voting system can be changed through a simple majority vote in Parliament... no constitutional amendment required!

⁹ Fair Vote Canada. "The Alternative Vote (or Instant Run-off Voting): It's no solution for the democratic deficit". http://www.fairvote.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/AV-backgrounder-august2009_1.pdf