Canadian electoral system in detail
‘First Past the Post’ system: how it functions, its benefits and drawbacks

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In Canada, candidates are elected under the single member plurality electoral system (SMP). Like many other former British colonies, Canada inherited the single member plurality system from Great Britain. The history of the system precedes Confederation; it was first used to elect members to the Nova Scotia legislature in 1758 (Source: Law Reform Commission of Canada,).

There are three main features that distinguish single member plurality from other types of electoral systems in the world:

- Candidates represent a specific geographic area, called a riding district;
- There is only one member elected in each riding district;
- Votes are counted on a district-by-district basis for the individual candidates, not for political parties; and,
- In order to win a riding, a candidate does not need to receive a clear majority (considered 50 percent plus one) of the votes. Instead, the candidate only needs to receive a relative majority (also called a plurality majority), meaning that s/he received more votes than any other candidate in the riding district.

Under the single member plurality system, a candidate can win a riding even though the majority of voters voted against him.

The single member plurality system is often referred to as the ‘first past the post’ system simply because, in a sense, it can be characterized as a race.

Positive and Negative Features of the First Past the Post Electoral System

There is both support for, and criticism against, the first past the post system. Arguments on both sides stem primarily from three key features:

- It tends to produce majority governments. Canada has had 38 federal elections since Confederation; only eight have resulted in minority governments.
- It tends to over-reward major parties, and under-reward smaller parties. Under SMP it is all too common for major parties to receive a higher percentage of seats than their share of the popular vote, while smaller parties receive fewer seats. For example, in the June 2004 federal election, the Green Party received 4.3 percent of the popular vote, but did not win any seats. Similarly, the NDP received 15.69 percent of the popular vote, but won only 19 out of 308 (approximately six percent) of House of Commons seats. By contrast, despite being reduced to a minority government, the Liberals still received a higher percentage of seats than their share of the popular vote (the party received 36.7 percent of the popular vote, but won nearly 44 percent of the seats). The trend becomes even clearer when looking at the 2000 federal election, where 40.8 of the popular vote was enough to give the Liberals over 55 percent of the seats, and a clear parliamentary majority.
It is very common for a party (or candidate) to win a majority of seats without winning a majority of votes. Between 1900 and 2004, Canadians elected 21 majority governments at the federal level, but only ten actually received over 50 percent of the popular vote.

Benefits of the First Past the Post Electoral System

While the first past the post system has been greatly criticized in recent years, it does have several advantages over other types of systems. These include:

- It tends to produce stable governments.
- It tends to produce a strong opposition party (both the winning party and the main opposition party often receive a higher number of seats than their share of the popular vote).
- It allows voters to support a local candidate who represents the geographical area in which they live.
- It allows individuals who are not members of a political party to run as independents.
- It is easy for voters to understand how the system works.
- It tends to provide a clear-cut contest between two major parties.

Still, advocates of electoral reform in Canada have pointed out several flaws with the first past the post system. These include:

- It is possible for the political party that received the second highest number of votes to win the election. This happened in the 1957 and 1979 federal elections, and in the 1996 BC election.
- It is very difficult for smaller parties with a national base – such as the NDP or the Green Party – to win seats.
- On the other hand, smaller parties with a strong regional base may get a “seat bonus,” winning more seats than their corresponding share of the popular vote. This party may claim to ‘speak’ for that region, even though the majority of people in the region may not have voted for the party.
- Voters who support smaller political parties may become discouraged with the political process. For example, those who voted for the Green Party in the 2004 federal election may feel their votes were wasted, since the Green Party did not win any seats.
- Women and minorities are under-represented in the legislatures of many countries with first past the post electoral systems

Why Did Canada Choose the Single Member Plurality Electoral System?

Historically speaking, there were several reasons why the Fathers of Confederation chose to implement the single member plurality electoral system for Canadian federal elections:

- The single member plurality system was already being used in several colonial legislatures, such as Nova Scotia.
• In the 1800s, there were only two main political parties operating at the federal level. Under SMP, one of these parties was guaranteed to win a majority government.
• The need for a stable majority government was considered more important than it is today. One important reason: a clear-cut majority made it possible for the government to pursue major policy objectives, such as building a national railroad.

Today, advocates of electoral reform believe Canadian society has changed significantly – to the point where the drawbacks of the single member plurality system outweigh its advantages.

Why is Electoral Reform a Hot Topic in Canada?
Factors ranging from low voter turnout to controversial election results have pushed electoral reform to the forefront

While the issue has received extensive media coverage as of late, dissatisfaction with Canada’s electoral system is nothing new. In the first half of the twentieth century, there were several efforts to reform electoral systems in Canada. In 1916, the federal Liberal government appointed a committee to examine electoral reform. In 1921, a special House of Commons committee recommended that the ‘alternative vote’ should be used in federal elections, although no action was taken.

At the provincial level, several western provinces experimented with alternate voting systems. The two types of systems the provinces experimented with were the single transferable vote and the alternative vote. Both are examples of a preferential voting system, whereby instead of marking an “X” beside one candidate, the voter ranks the candidates in order of preference. Under the single transferable vote, the voter ranks the candidates within a political party in order of preference. Under the alternative vote, the voter ranks all the candidates that are running in order of preference. The single transferable vote is a type of proportional representation system. The alternative vote is very similar to the first past the post system, except that the candidate is elected with an absolute majority (instead of merely a relative majority) of the votes. The following provides an historic overview of the different electoral systems used by several western provinces:

• In Manitoba, between 1920 and 1955 the single transferable vote (STV) was used in Winnipeg provincial constituencies. Between 1924 and 1955, the alternative vote (AV) was used in rural ridings.
• In Alberta, between 1924 and 1956, the single transferable vote was used in the cities of Calgary and Edmonton, while the alternative vote was used in rural ridings
• In British Columbia, both the 1952 and 1953 provincial elections were held using the alternative vote system.

By the late 1950s, all of these provinces had returned to the first past the post electoral system.

What is Behind the Most Recent Upsurge in Interest over Electoral Reform?
Beginning in the 1990s, there has been much renewed interest in electoral reform, for several reasons:

- **Unfairness in party representation.** Historically, Canadian federal politics has been dominated by two political parties, the Progressive Conservatives and the Liberals. This trend came to an end in the 1993 election, as the Bloc Québécois and the western-based Reform Party won over 50 seats each, while the Progressive Conservatives were reduced to two. Since 1993, five political parties have competed for the votes of Canadians – meaning that the tendency of the first past the post system to over-reward large parties and under-reward small parties has been increasingly magnified. Critics of the first past the post system argue that voters who choose to support one of the smaller parties are not being fairly represented in the House of Commons.

- **Decline in voter turnout.** Voter turnout at federal elections has been declining steadily since the 1988 election. In a survey for Elections Canada, one of the main reasons people cited for not voting was the feeling that their vote was meaningless, since the election outcome was largely viewed as a foregone conclusion. Electoral reform advocates believe that people would be more likely to vote under a different electoral system, where the number of seats a party wins more closely matches its share of the popular vote.

- **Controversial election results.** A major reason that electoral reform has progressed farther in BC than in any other province is voter anger over the results of the 1996 provincial election. In that election, the NDP won a majority of seats and formed the government, even though the Liberals received a higher percentage of the popular vote. Similarly, in 1998 the Parti Québécois won the Quebec provincial election, even though the Quebec Liberal party received a higher percentage of votes.

- **Lack of an Effective Opposition.** In some provinces, the impetus for electoral reform came about in the wake of provincial elections that gave the winning party an overwhelming number of seats, with the result that there was little or no opposition. **One example is the 1987 New Brunswick provincial election, which saw the Liberal party virtually sweep the province, winning all 58 seats.** Although less dramatic, similar results have occurred in Prince Edward Island. For example, the Progressive Conservatives won 26 out of 27 seats in the 2000 PEI provincial election.

- **Organized Lobbying.** Since the 1990s, several advocacy groups have formed to lobby for electoral reform. These include [Fair Vote Canada](#) and its provincial chapters, Every Vote Counts ( Prince Edward Island ) and [Mouvement pour une démocratie nouvelle](#) ( Quebec ).
Options for Electoral Reform in Canada?

Choices for governments range from maintaining the status quo to implementing pure proportional representation.

This section provides a brief overview of some of the alternatives to the first past the post system.

Proportional Representation

There are many variations among proportional representation (PR) systems, particularly with respect to how voters fill out the ballots and how seats are allocated. However, the main features of this type of electoral system are as follows:

- PR is more about the distribution of seats among political parties, rather than electing individuals to the legislature.
- Its goal is to ensure the makeup of the legislature accurately reflects the percentage of votes received by each political party.
- It uses ‘multi-member districts,’ with more than one member being elected in each riding district. The exact number of members can vary from district to district, depending upon factors including population and geographical size.
- Under PR the size of each district can vary significantly.
- Seats are allocated based on a mathematical formula.
- In most systems, political parties need to obtain a minimum number of votes, called a threshold, in order to elect members to the legislature.

Types of Proportional Representation:

Party Lists, the Single Transferable Vote (STV)

The system most commonly used to achieve proportional representation is the party list system. The two types of lists used are the ‘open list’ and the ‘closed list.’ In both the open and closed list systems, the names of each political party and the candidates they are running are listed. The main difference between the two is that, under an open list, voters can select individual candidates within the party. There are several methods of doing this, from asking voters to cast one vote for a specific candidate within a party, to asking them to rank the candidates within a party in order of preference. Under a closed list, the voter selects a political party, and the candidates are elected in the order in which they appear on the list. Under this system, the voter has no opportunity to mark the ballot for a specific candidate. The advantage of the closed list is that it allows the political party to manipulate the list to ensure more women and/or minorities are selected. In either case, in each riding district votes are counted for individual parties, not individual candidates.

Another method used to achieve proportional representation is the single transferable vote (STV). Used in the Republic of Ireland since 1922, this system achieves proportionality by having voters rank their preferences among individual candidates, rather than political parties. Voters receive one ballot, and rank the candidates in the voter’s order of preference by placing a number beside each; “1” for their favorite candidate, “2” for their second favorite, etc. The quota, or number of votes a candidate needs to be elected, is set ahead of time and can vary. Once a
candidate receives enough first preference votes to be elected, s/he does not receive any additional votes. Instead, the second preference votes on the ballot are counted and distributed. Similarly, if a candidate receives too few votes to be elected, that candidate is dropped from the list and the second preference votes on the ballot are used. This process continues until all of the district seats have been filled.

The main advantage of the single transferable vote is that it gives voters a method of proportional representation that allows each voter to select individual candidates, instead of political parties. Since there is no such thing as a ‘safe seat’ in STV systems, party discipline is very weak.

**Mixed Member Proportional**

Sometimes called ‘the best of both worlds,’ mixed member proportional (MMP) is a increasingly popular means of applying proportionality to the first past the post system. Under most MMP systems, voters cast two ballots (voters may actually be given two separate ballots, or one ballot with two areas to mark). The first ballot is for a specific candidate, and the second is for a political party. The winning candidate on the first ballot is chosen based on first past the post; whichever candidate obtains the most votes wins. The second ballot is designed to take care of any discrepancies in representation as a result of the first vote. For example, if a party received 40 percent of the popular vote, but won only 20 out of 100 district seats, it would be given an additional 20 seats for a total of 40. Like most PR systems, political parties need to receive a minimum percentage of votes (usually five percent) to receive seats in the legislature.

The mixed member proportional system creates two types of members in the legislature: those who are responsible to the electorate in a specific geographic district (“district MPs”), and those who owe their position to the political party (“list MPs”). The advantage of mixed member proportional: it provides voters with local representation, and, at the same time, corrects any major discrepancies between the percentage of votes a party receives and the percentage of seats it wins (the problem that is viewed by some as plaguing the FPTP system). **It is used in New Zealand, where, in the upcoming 2005 election, 69 MPs will be elected from district constituencies, and 51 will be elected from party lists. It’s also used in the German Bundestrat (Parliament), where one-half of the 600 members are elected in single member districts, with the remainder being elected through the party list system using regional lists.**

The type of regional mixed member proportional system used in the Bundestrat (and also in Scotland and Wales) is the one being considered by many Canadian provinces currently exploring electoral reform. Under this model, the list MPs would represent specific regions made up of a group of ridings.

For examples of open list, closed list, single transferable vote and mixed member proportional ballots, see the [Accurate Democracy web site](http://www.accuratedemocracy.org)

**Alternative Vote**

The alternative vote (AV) is not a proportional system. Like SMP, it elects single members to represent districts. Under AV, voters are required to rank the candidates
in their order of preference. If no candidate receives a majority of votes on the first ballot, the candidate with the least number of votes is dropped from the list; the voters’ second-place choices are then considered. This process continues until one of the candidates receives a majority of votes.

Like FPTP, the alternative vote is designed to elect individual candidates to the legislature. The main difference between the first past the post system and the alternative vote is that the alternative vote gives the winner a clear majority (50 percent plus one) instead of a relative majority (more votes than any other candidate).