

Electoral Reform in Canada: The Shape of Things to Come

An Executive Summary

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**Public Services
Foundation of Canada**





We are committed to ensuring that 2015 will be the last federal election conducted under the first-past-the-post voting system. As part of a national engagement process, we will ensure that electoral reform measures—such as ranked ballots, proportional representation, mandatory voting, and online voting—are fully and fairly studied and considered Within 18 months of forming government, we will bring forward legislation to enact electoral reform.

—Justin Trudeau, Real Change: A Fair and Open Government

ABOUT THIS EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Public Services Foundation of Canada and the National Union of Public and General Employees have prepared a comprehensive discussion paper based on a survey of the literature and polling and focus group results, which will be published at a later date.

This executive summary provides an overview of the main points without the inclusion of the research, position paper, or polling results.

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Executive Summary

The Canadian Debate

Justin Trudeau promised during the election that this would be the last federal election to use the unfair **first-past-the-post** (FPTP) system. Although he has indicated that other voting systems would be considered, Trudeau has indicated that his preferred proposal is a version of the **single transferable vote** (STV) that uses a ranked ballot. His critics say that when STV is used in single member ridings, it is really just an **alternative vote** (AV) system, also known as an **instant run-off** system, and the result would be even more unfair in its outcome than FPTP. An analysis shortly after the election showed that Trudeau's favoured system, in this last election, would have led to an even bigger Liberal majority—further undermining the representativeness of Parliament.

The Conservative opposition has taken no position on any proposal other than demanding that any change be subject to a referendum. New Democrats have long favoured a **mixed member proportional** (MMP) system, as found in Germany and New Zealand. The NDP has also suggested that a referendum be held after the public has had some experience with a new voting system. It was also proposed that the committee studying proposed changes be representative of all the parties in Parliament.

The Green Party supports some form of proportional representation, and the Bloc has supported resolutions proposed by the NDP in the previous Parliament.

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Electoral Systems

Broadly speaking, there are four families of electoral systems:

1. Plurality—including first past the post (FPTP)
2. Majority—including Trudeau’s alternative vote (AV) proposal
3. Proportional—including list systems used in many Scandinavian countries and multi-member constituencies using STV (proposed for Canada by Stéphane Dion in 2012)
4. Mixed—includes **mixed member proportional** (MMP) such as in Germany and New Zealand, and **mixed member majoritarian** (MMM) in countries such as Japan and the Philippines

Plurality and majority systems usually elect one member per electoral district. Proportional systems usually use multi-member districts.

Mixed systems combine the election of single members in constituencies with a second group of seats to make the overall results more representative of the ballots cast in an election.

Each of these systems is discussed in more detail below.

Plurality Electoral Systems

The primary plurality electoral system is **first past the post** (FPTP) sometimes called the **single member plurality** (SMP). This is the method of election presently used in Canada.

Change is being considered in large part because FPTP more often than not distorts the voters’ overall intentions, awarding majorities to parties receiving less than 40 per cent of the popular vote.

Majority Voting Systems

There are two principal systems of majority voting.

First is the **alternative vote** (AV) system used in a few countries such as Australia, and the **two-round system** (TR) used in countries such as France, Egypt, and Vietnam.

In the **alternative vote** (AV) system each geographical electoral district elects a single member of parliament based on the requirement that the winning candidate achieve at least 50 per cent plus one of the votes. To achieve this result, each voter receives a preferential ballot and the candidates for election are ranked 1, 2, 3, etc. If no candidate receives the required 50 per cent, the second choices of those electors whose first choice was the candidate receiving the lowest number of votes are reallocated. If 50 per cent is still not achieved, the votes of the next lowest candidate are reallocated. This process continues until a candidate receives the required 50 per cent plus one.

In the **two-round** (TR) system, voters in each geographical district elect one member who must receive 50 per cent plus one of all votes received. A ballot that lists all the candidates for election (similar to FPTP) in the district is used. If a candidate does not receive the required majority of votes a second round of voting is held usually a week after the initial vote.

In some systems, such as the French Presidential elections, only the two candidates receiving the most votes remain on the second ballot.

Proportional Representation Systems

There are two principal forms of proportional representation: **list proportional** (LPR) and the **single transferable vote** (STV).



In the **list proportional** (LPR) system, each geographical district elects more than a single member. A proportional formula is used to allocate the seats in a multi-member constituency.

To achieve this proportionality, a party-list ballot is used. There are several variations, including a closed-list ballot in which voters choose the party they support, an open-list system in which the voters may reorder their party's list of candidates, and a free list ballot which allows voters to rank any of the candidates regardless of party.

The **list proportional** (LPR) systems produce legislatures that closely represent each party's share of the vote. This system also produces a diversity of parties that tend to form coalition governments.

A second type of proportional representation with multi-member districts is the **single transferable vote** (STV) system. This system is used in Malta, the Republic of Ireland and in the Australian Senate. Each geographic district elects more than one member. Some districts may have four, five, or six members depending on the number of voters.

The formula used to elect members is based on a quota. For example, in a five member district the threshold for election would be 16.7 per cent plus one vote. Voters use a ranked ballot similar to the **alternative vote** (AV) system.

Single transferable vote STV is used in only a very few countries and two of them are predominantly two-party systems. The system is complex by Canadian standards and the size of multi-member districts required to make this functional in a Canadian context might be problematic.

Mixed Family

Mixed member proportional (MMP) was first used in 1949 in the former West Germany and is now used in New Zealand and a number of other countries in Europe and South America.

Under MMP, voters receive a double ballot. On one side is the FPTP ballot with a list of candidates to choose from to represent the local constituency. On the other is a list of political parties seeking representation in the legislature—the party vote. A voter can only choose to support only one party on the list but may choose to support a local candidate from another party.

The proportional seats are filled in a manner that is unique to MMP. Assume that in a 300-seat legislature half of the seats are elected at the constituency level and half from the adjustment or proportional seats. Each party's share of the vote is used to determine the overall number of seats it should have. The number of seats won at the local level is subtracted from the number of seats it should have based on the party vote. What remains is the number of adjustment seats that the party will receive.

The German experience has produced stable coalition governments. The same seems to be the case for New Zealand.

A variant of the MMP is the **additional member system** (AMS) as it is employed in Scotland.

In Scotland 129 Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) are elected in two ways. Individual constituencies are represented by 73 members elected under the **first-past-the-post** system. In addition, 56 members are selected from party lists in the country's 8 electoral regions.

The German and New Zealand experience with mixed member proportional (MMP) systems has **produced stable coalition governments.**

Assessing the Options for Canada

In December 2015, Abacus Data polled Canadians on various electoral reform issues on behalf of the Broadbent Institute.

According to this poll, most Canadians think Canada's system for electing Members of Parliament needs to change.

- 42 per cent thought the system needs major changes or needs to be changed completely.
- A plurality of respondents (41 per cent) thought that the system only needs minor changes.
- About 1 in 5 (17 per cent) were satisfied with the status quo and felt no changes were needed.

Canadians were asked to choose their preferred voting system, **and most chose a proportional system.**

Survey respondents were provided descriptions of 4 electoral systems, including the current one, and were asked to rank the system from most preferred to least preferred.

Overall,

- a plurality of respondents (44 per cent) ranked one of the proportional systems (either **mixed member** or pure PR under which electors vote only for parties) as their first choice.
- Another 43 per cent ranked FPTP (SMP) as their most preferred system.
- The ranked or preferential ballot system (AV) was the least favoured voting system as it was ranked first by only 14 per cent of respondents.

On behalf of the Broadbent Institute, Abacus also modeled the 2015 election results under various electoral systems. The table below compares the outcome of the election using 4 different systems.

	LPC	CPC	NDP	BQ	GPC
Popular Vote	40%	32%	20%	5%	3%
SMP (CURRENT)	184	99	44	10	1
% of seats	54%	30%	13%	3%	0.3%
Ranked Ballot	217	66	50	4	1
% of seats	64%	20%	15%	1.2%	0.3%
<i>Difference between SMP and Ranked Ballot</i>	+33	-33	+6	-6	-
National PR	136	108	67	16	11
% of seats	40%	32%	20%	4.7%	3.3%
Provincial PR	139	106	66	15	11
% of seats	41%	31%	20%	4.5%	3.3%

Moving Forward What's Best for Us

Canada's elections have produced some of the most disproportionate results among all established democracies. In one study, Canada ranked 35th of 38 countries when it comes to matching seats in the legislature to the share of votes received in the election.

Parties with regional-based strengths are rewarded with seat strength that can far exceed their national popular vote. Likewise, parties that have evenly distributed strength across all regions receive fewer seats than they deserve.

If FPTP is not working, **what should an alternative look like?**

If FPTP is not working, what should an alternative look like?

To consider this question let's look at what respondents to the Abacus Poll, conducted on behalf of the Broadbent Institute in December 2015, said they wanted in their electoral system.

When asked to rate the goals Canadians value most in an electoral system, the top 5 are

1. The ballot is simple and easy to understand.
2. The system produces stable and strong governments.
3. The system allows you to directly elect MPs who represent your community.
4. The system ensures that the government has MPs from each region of the country.
5. The system ensures that the number of seats held by a party in Parliament closely matches their actual level of support throughout the country.

Given the strong desire to directly elect MPs that represent a voter's community, a nationally or provincially based **list proportional** (LPR) system does not seem to fit the bill. It could also fail on the



first goal as the ballot for **open-** or **free-list** elections would be much more complicated. On the other three points it could be argued that PR would be a significant improvement.

Alternate vote (AV) or **single transferable vote (STV)** also introduce a level of complexity into the balloting. While AV does retain the direct relationship with the voter in goal 3 and would perform similarly to our current FPTP system on goal 2, it fails to make any gains in regional representativeness or proportionality.

STV systems don't have the same direct relationship that voters seem to want with their representatives in goal 3. But they would be an improvement from the status quo on the remaining goals of regional representation and proportionality.

Mixed member proportional (MMP) systems may succeed on all five goals to some degree. Voters continue to have MPs elected at a local level. They produce stable governments in other countries where they are used. They provide greater proportionality, where seats won are more reflective of the votes won. They ensure better regional representation within an elected government. On the first goal, the ballot could simply be the local ballot plus a party list ballot on which voters mark a preference for a single party. Or it can be more complicated, in which the party ballot allows ranking of candidates from within a party's list.

An MMP system may best meet the goals of Canadians. Which MMP system would be preferable? In a German-style system, the local constituency seats are equal in number to the list or balancing seats. In the Canadian context this would mean either a reduction in local constituency seats to keep the 338-member House of Commons, or a doubling in size of the House of Commons.

The Scottish style of MMP—the **additional member system**—has 73 constituency members and 56 additional members, or a

roughly 60-40 split of the representation. In the Canadian context that would mean 203 constituency seats and 135 additional seats. Or, if the Commons were to be increased from 338 members, an extra 226 seats.

Some commentators criticize proportional systems, including **mixed member proportional** (MMP) as too complicated and too unstable. Often Italy and Israel are used as examples, although neither has MMP. On the first point, adding a **single-party-list** vote would probably add at most 30 seconds to a voter's experience at the ballot box. On the second, countries such as Germany, New Zealand and Scotland provide good examples of how mixed member systems create both strong and stable governments.

One critique of the **closed-list** systems is that party brass and back roomers get to decide the candidates, not the voter. This concern can be addressed by using **open lists** in which party supporters get to rank the candidates put forward by their party.



Recommendations:

1. The government should be strongly urged to make good on its commitment to replace the current **first-past-the-post** (FPTP) electoral system before the next federal election.
2. Extensive consultations should be held across the country to engage Canadians on this fundamental question of democratic reform.
3. Proposals to be considered should include a **mixed member proportional** (MMP) system similar to the **additional member system** (AMS) in Scotland and the MMP systems in Germany and New Zealand, including both closed- and open-list options.
4. In developing proposals to improve the overall fairness of the electoral system, parliamentarians should be mindful of the goals of simplicity and the desire of Canadians to maintain a direct relationship with a local MP. Any new system must produce strong and stable governments and a legislature reflecting both the diversity of our distinct regions and our society as a whole.
5. To ensure that Canadians have practical experience before voting on a changed voting process, any legislation approved by Parliament should include a requirement for a referendum to continue the new voting rules or to return to FPTP following the new voting system's initial use.



Public Services Foundation of Canada



The Public Services Foundation of Canada (PSFC) is a national research and advocacy organization dedicated to defending and promoting the value of high-quality public services.

The National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) is one of Canada's largest labour organizations with over 360,000 members. Our mission is to improve the lives of working families and to build a stronger Canada by ensuring our common wealth is used for the common good.

