



Two types of voting systems for two types of elections

Elections have different purposes. When the right system is used for the right purpose, democracy works. When the wrong system is used, democracy is compromised.

Type 1: Winner-Take-All Elections

In some cases, we hold elections to choose a single leader – e.g., an officer of an organization: president, vice-president, treasurer. The objective is to identify the most widely supported candidate to assume that one-person leadership role.

This is called a winner-take-all election. One group of voters will elect their preferred candidate (those voters are the winners), while other voters will not (the losers).

These elections require a winner-take-all voting system, of which there are several variations.

Type 2: Full Representation Elections

In other cases, we hold elections to create a *representative body* – for example, a board of directors or a council.

In these elections, the objective is to elect a *number of people* to hold *similar positions* in order to represent and be accountable to *all voters*.

In this case, the objective is *not* to sort voters into those who win representation and those who don't. The objective is to get as close as possible to creating representation for all, by letting all voters elect someone.

In these cases, you need a full-representation voting system (sometimes called fair voting or proportional voting). Again, there are a variety of choices on how to set up these systems.

Winner-Take-All Options for Electing Officers

If voters in an organization are directly electing a president or other officer, there

are several types of winner-take-all systems to consider.

1) First-past-the-post

Canadians are quite familiar with one. We use First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) voting in federal and provincial elections, as well as in most other elections.

Ballots are marked by putting an X next to the preferred candidate. The candidate with the most votes wins. The winning candidate could get 70% of the votes or 30% - the percentage doesn't matter. The winner just needs one more vote than the second place finisher.

2) Instant run-off voting

Another type of winner-take-all voting is called Instant Run-off Voting (IRV). With IRV, voters rank candidates: first, second, third and so on. If no candidate receives a majority of first-choice votes, the least popular candidate is dropped and those ballots are re-assigned according to the second choices. This process is continued until one candidate has a majority of ballots. It seeks to elect to a position a candidate popular beyond his or her core supporters.

Winner-Take-All for Electing a Board: Why It's Bad

The election of a single officer, such as a president, requires a winner-take-all ballot. This is not the case when electing a full board of directors. For board elections, a system that represents as many members as possible can and should be used.

Why? In a nutshell, winner-take-all can allow a minority of voters to elect every winning candidate – or it can allow a small majority to elect every candidate. In either case, a significant portion of voters can be shut out.

For example, if a board is composed of one winning candidate elected from each region, department or division, that winning candidate may have been elected with as little as 40% or 30%, if they use FPTP, leaving the majority unrepresented. Even if IRV was used, a sizable minority would not win representation on the board.

It is more typical for a board to have mostly at-large seats elected by a system called block voting.

With a block vote, voters put an X next to the number of candidates equal to the number of seats being filled. For example, if the board has five seats to be filled, voters put Xs next to five candidates.

Unfortunately, this system creates the *same problems* as first-past-the-post. A minority of voters could elect every candidate, denying representation to everyone else.

Fortunately, full representation system can eliminate that problem. A common one that works well for board elections is called Full Choice Voting. The ballot looks the same as an IRV ranked ballot, with the counting structured to provide as many voters as possible with their first-ranked candidate.