

# **DUBIOUS DEMOCRACY**

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**REPORT ON  
FEDERAL ELECTIONS  
IN CANADA FROM 1980-2004**

January 2006



**Fair Représentation  
Vote équitable  
Canada au Canada**

***“The right of decision belongs to the majority,  
but the right of representation belongs to all.”***

*This simple, but eloquent, description of representative democracy was offered by Swiss political scientist Ernest Naville in 1865. Each citizen has an equal voice and then, by mutual consent, we live by majority rule. These are the core principles of democracy, or so we are taught.*

*But does the Canadian electoral system actually support these fundamental democratic principles? Or do we live in a dubious democracy?*

*This report addresses these questions by assessing the outcomes of federal elections from 1980 to 2004. We consider the principle of one citizen, one vote, and then examine the reality of wasted votes. We consider what Canadians say at the ballot box versus what they get. We consider the principle of majority rule, and then review our history of minority rule.*

*Does Canada’s current electoral system support or subvert a healthy representative democracy? The facts speak for themselves.*

About this report:

This report was prepared and written by Larry Gordon, Executive Director, Fair Vote Canada. Unless indicated otherwise in footnotes, the data come from Elections Canada. Special thanks to Fair Vote Canada co-founder Christopher Billows for his extensive compilation of federal and provincial election data which made this report possible.

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## **Introduction:**

### **Welcome to the Strange World of First-Past-the-Post**

While Canadian students are taught all citizens are equal at the ballot box, nothing could be further from the truth. Consider the following results from the June 2004 federal election.

- A half-million Green Party voters across the country elected nobody, while fewer than a half-million Liberal voters in Atlantic Canada elected 22 MPs.
- In the prairie provinces, the Conservatives attracted twice as many votes as the Liberals but won seven times as many seats.
- The NDP received far more votes than the Bloc Quebecois, but the Bloc gained nearly three times as many seats and hold the balance of power.
- Thirteen Conservative MPs were elected in Saskatchewan, but none in Quebec, where almost twice as many people voted Conservative.

Unfortunately, distorted election results, phony majority governments, and wild disparities in the treatment of voters are not aberrations. This is business-as-usual in Canada's electoral arena.

The following pages provide a summary assessment of federal elections held between 1980 and 2004. This overview examines the problems of wasted votes, distorted outcomes, phony majority governments, poor representation for women, and declining voter turnout.

# 1. UNREPRESENTED CITIZENS: Millions of (Wasted) Votes Do Not Count

Representative democracy is based on the principle that every citizen has an equal vote. By voting, citizens gain representation in parliament.

That's the theory. Unfortunately, in Canada, theory and reality diverge. Our winner-take-all voting system is just what it says. Those casting votes for the most popular candidate in their riding are the winners. Those voters elect an MP. They win political representation in Parliament. The other voters in that riding are the losers. They might just as well have stayed home on election day.

*Canada's winner-take-all (or first-past-the-post) voting system does not treat all voters equally. Many cast votes but gain no political representation. For these citizens, the democracy deficit begins at the ballot box.*

The following sections provide more detail about the victims of winner-take-all voting.

## **Wasted Votes Nationally: 49%**

In the seven federal elections between 1980 and 2004, just over 49% of the votes were wasted. On average in federal elections, more than 6.3 million Canadians cast wasted votes that elected no one.

*In the last New Zealand election, 99% of the voters were able to elect MPs, compared to 50% of the votes in the last Canadian election.*

How does this compare to countries using proportional voting systems, which are designed to help make every vote count? Consider Germany, New Zealand and Scotland<sup>1</sup>, which use mixed proportional systems, similar to that recently proposed for Canada by the Law Commission of Canada.

<i>New Zealand - 2005 election:</i>	<i>1% wasted votes</i>
<i>Germany - 2005 election:</i>	<i>4% wasted votes</i>
<i>Scotland - 2003 election:</i>	<i>6% wasted votes</i>
<i>Canada - 2004 election:</i>	<i>50% wasted votes</i>

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<sup>1</sup> Data obtained from: [www.electionresults.govt.nz](http://www.electionresults.govt.nz); [www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk); and [www.bundeswahlleiter.de/bundestagswahl2005/presse\\_en/pd391211.html](http://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/bundestagswahl2005/presse_en/pd391211.html).

For Germans, New Zealanders and Scots, more than nine out of ten voters were able to help elect an MP. This compares to only five out of ten Canadian voters.

## **Wasted Votes By Province**

While the wasted vote averages for all provinces are appalling, some provinces have been significantly worse than others. Voters in Saskatchewan, British Columbia and Manitoba were the least likely to elect an MP and have their voices represented. In Saskatchewan, nearly six in ten voters have been denied political representation, compared to four in ten voters in Alberta.

<u>Province</u>	<u>Wasted votes</u>
1. Saskatchewan	57%
2. British Columbia	55%
3. Manitoba	54%
4. Nova Scotia	53%
5. Ontario	51%
6. New Brunswick	50%
7. PEI	48%
8. Newfoundland	45%
9. Quebec	45%
10. Alberta	41%

*In Saskatchewan, voting has been a futile exercise for nearly six in ten voters. These citizens cast votes but failed to elect MPs.*

In the elections between 1980 and 2004, the highest percentage of wasted votes cast in any province occurred in Saskatchewan in 1993. In that election, more than 65% of Saskatchewan voters failed to elect an MP.

In the last federal election, British Columbians had the highest percentage of wasted votes at 63.8%.

## **Wasted Votes by Riding**

It gets worse when considering wasted votes in individual ridings.

The June 2004 federal election produced a House of Commons in which 172 of the 308 MPs failed to attract even 50% of the votes in their ridings.

*Nine MPs elected in 2004 received less than 35% of the votes cast in their ridings. One MP actually won a seat in Parliament with less than 30% of the vote.*

In fact, 43 MPs failed to attract even 40% of the total votes. In a few cases, fully two-thirds of the votes cast were wasted.

### Top 10 Ridings for Wasted Votes - 2004 Federal Election

	<u>MP won</u>	<u>Wasted votes</u>
Saskatoon-Humboldt	26.8%	73.2%
Newton-North Delta	32.8%	67.2%
New Westminster-Coquitlam	32.9%	67.1%
Oshawa	33.2%	66.8%
Regina Lumsden-Lake Centre	33.2%	66.8%
Burnaby-New Westminster	33.7%	66.3%
Saanich-Gulf Islands	34.6%	65.4%
Burnaby-Douglas	34.6%	65.4%
Hamilton Mountain	34.8%	65.2%
Victoria	35.0%	65.0%

These data should not be interpreted as a criticism of the MPs. Many, if not all, worked hard to represent their supporters. The criticism should focus on the voting system that denied political representation for 65% to 73% of the voters in these ridings.

### Wasted Votes by Party Supporters

Some parties have been more damaged by the voting system than others. Parties with their supporters spread evenly across the country are hindered more than those with strong support in specific regions.

*In the 1990s, Progressive Conservative voters were the least likely to win representation, when nine out of ten were casting wasted votes.*

Five major parties have competed and won seats in the elections held between 1980 and 2004. The voters supporting the various parties, however, have not been treated equally at the ballot box.

<b>Party</b>	<b>Wasted Vote Average</b>	<b>Elections (full slates)</b>
Bloc Quebecois	25.7%	4
Liberal	43.3%	7
Conservative	46.3%	1
Reform/Alliance	51.6%	3
Progressive Conservatives	59.8%	6
NDP	79.7%	7
Green	100.0%	1

The totals of wasted votes for each party often mask the glaring regional differences.

For example, Liberal voters in the western provinces face the same problem as Conservative voters in Ontario – because they are not the largest voting block, they are often unable to cast effective votes that help elect MPs. As a result, party caucuses are often dominated by MPs from one region rather than all parts of the country.

*Wasted votes are not just a problem for small parties. In fact, 59% of all wasted votes cast in 2004 were cast by Liberal and Conservative voters, who happened to live in the “wrong” place.*

### **Votes Per Seat**

Another way of measuring voter equality is to compare how many votes, on average, a party must attract in order to win a seat.

If the voting system treated all votes equally, the ratios for each party would be similar. That would indicate that the weight of each vote is similar, regardless of what party the voter supports.

*In the 2004 election, a Bloc vote had nearly four times the weight, or impact, of an NDP vote. In other words, a Bloc voter was nearly four times as likely to elect an MP.*

The following chart shows the averages in the 2004 election.

Bloc:	1 MP	per	31,000 Bloc voters
Liberal:	1 MP	per	37,000 Liberal voters
Conservative	1 MP	per	40,000 Conservative voters
NDP:	1 MP	per	111,000 NDP voters
Green:	0 MP	per	580,000 Green voters

## 2. DISTORTED ELECTION OUTCOMES: What We Say is Not What We Get

Some parties gain a much higher number of seats than deserved, while others receive a lower number or sometimes none at all. The distortion of results is why most major democracies scrapped first-past-the-post voting between 50 and 100 years ago.

*Canada ranked 35<sup>th</sup> among 37 established democracies on disproportionate (or distorted) election outcomes since 1945. \**

### Distorted Results - National

The following chart shows the distortion effect for the parties forming governments after the past seven elections. The seat bonus (percentage of undeserved seats) ranged from a low of 7.1% in 2004 to a whopping 24.8% in 1984.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Winner</u>	<u>Pop. vote</u>	<u>Seats</u>	<u>Difference</u>
1980	Liberals	44.3%	52.1%	7.8% seat bonus
1984	Tories	50.0%	74.8%	24.8% seat bonus <sup>2</sup>
1988	Tories	43.0%	57.3%	14.3 % seat bonus
1993	Liberal	41.3%	60.0%	18.7% seat bonus
1997	Liberal	38.5%	51.5%	13.0% seat bonus
2000	Liberal	40.9%	57.5%	16.6% seat bonus
2004	Liberal	36.7%	43.8% (minority)	7.1% seat bonus

<sup>2</sup> This outcome came close to the all-time Canadian record, set by the Liberals in 1935 when the voting system awarded them a 25.4% seat bonus.

\* *Voting Counts: Electoral Reform for Canada*, Law Commission of Canada (2004), pp. 59, 73, citing David Farrell study (1997) on disproportional election outcomes. Also cited was a study identifying the 1993 Canadian federal election as the second most distorted outcome of all elections in 11 major democracies since 1968.

## Distorted Results - Provinces

Distortions within provinces during federal elections are even more extreme. The following list provides examples where one party gained a crushing advantage because of our winner-take-all system.

In one particularly stunning case, a party with only 45% of the popular vote won every seat. In many other cases, 50% to 55% for one party was enough to capture all but one or two seats.

*In many cases, when a party captures 50% to 55% of the votes in a province, that is enough to effectively wipe out representation for other parties.*

1997	PEI	Liberals win 4 of 4 seats (100%) with 45% of the vote
2000	PEI	Liberals won 4 of 4 seats (100%) with 47% of the vote
1988	PEI	Liberals won 4 of 4 seats (100%) with 50% of the vote
1988	Alberta	Tories won 26 of 26 seats (100%) with 52% of the vote
1993	NS	Liberals won 11 of 11 seats (100%) with 52% of the vote
1980	Alberta	Tories won 21 of 21 seats (100%) with 65% of the vote
1993	Ontario	Liberals won 98 of 99 seats (99%) with 53% of the vote
1980	Quebec	Liberals won 74 of 75 seats (99%) with 68% of the vote
1997	Ontario	Liberals won 101 of 103 seats (98%) with 50% of the vote
2000	Ontario	Liberals won 100 of 103 seats (97%) with 52% of the vote
2004	Sask.	Conservatives won 13 of 14 seats (93%) with 42% of the vote
1997	Alberta	Reform won 24 of 26 seats (92%) with 55% of the vote
1993	NB	Liberals won 9 of 10 seats (90%) with 56% of the vote
1984	NB	Tories won 9 of 10 seats (90%) with 54% of the vote
2000	Alberta	Alliance won 23 of 26 seats (88%) with 59% of the vote
1993	Manitoba	Liberals won 12 of 14 seats (86%) with 45% of the vote

The following distorted outcomes chart shows the ranking of provinces in federal elections from 1980 to 2004. Not surprisingly, PEI, where Liberals can often win every seat with just 45% to 50% of the votes, had the most distorted results.

### **Provincial Rankings Based on Distorted Results**

<u>Province</u>	<u>Average Distortion</u> <sup>3</sup>
1. PEI	39.35%
2. Alberta	35.05%
3. Ontario	31.42%
4. British Columbia	27.57%
5. Saskatchewan	27.09%
6. Quebec	24.30%
7. New Brunswick	23.54%
8. Newfoundland	23.47%
9. Nova Scotia	21.89%
10. Manitoba	19.50%

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<sup>3</sup> The distortion of election results can be measured in a number of ways. This chart uses the Loosemore-Hanby Index. The index is determined by summing up the differences between the vote percentage and seat percentage for all parties competing in a jurisdiction and then dividing that sum by two.

### 3. PHONY MAJORITY GOVERNMENTS: Majority Rule or Majority Fooled?

Canadians are often subject to rule by phony majority governments – governments formed by parties that captured a majority of seats *without* winning a majority of votes.

Since 1921, Canada has had 15 majority federal governments – but only 4 were legitimate majority governments, elected by a majority of voters.

Canadians have experienced legitimate majority governments for only 17 of the last 85 years. The results of the elections since 1980 appear below.

*The Chretien government formed in 1997 has the distinction of being the phoniest phony majority Canadian government of all time. With just 38.5% of the popular vote, the Liberals were able to win 51.5% of the seats.*

<u>Year</u>	<u>Winner</u>	<u>Pop vote</u>	<u>Seats</u>	<u>Results</u>
1980	Liberals	44.3%	52.1%	Phony majority
1984	Tories	50.0%	74.8%	Exaggerated majority
1988	Tories	43.0%	57.3%	Phony majority
1993	Liberals	41.3%	60.0%	Phony majority
1997	Liberals	38.5%	51.5%	Phoniest majority ever
2000	Liberals	40.9%	57.5%	Phony majority
2004	Liberals	36.7%	43.8%	Minority

The government holding power prior to the 1980 election was one of four examples in Canadian electoral history where a party finishing *second* in the popular vote formed the government. In 1979, Joe Clark's Tories won 36% of the votes compared to the Liberal's 40%. But the Tories captured 48% of the seats, compared to just 40% for the Liberals, allowing them to form a short-lived minority government.

In 1896, the Liberals actually formed a majority government with 55% of the seats, despite winning fewer votes than the Tories, who won only 41% of the seats.

## 4. WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT: Do Voting Systems Matter?

Among the many factors that determine who becomes a candidate and ultimately wins a seat, the voting system plays a significant role.

In proportional voting systems, parties have to present lists of candidates for some, if not all, of the seats. Parties can gain an advantage by putting up a list that reflects the diversity of the community with equal numbers of women and a fair representation of visible minorities. In contrast, the first-past-the-post system forces parties to choose just one candidate for each riding. In that situation, parties gain advantage by nominating the most mainstream and least risky candidate, which often leads to a preponderance of white male candidates.

Compare the percentage of women in the national legislatures<sup>4</sup> of the United States, United Kingdom and Canada, the only three major western democracies using first-past-the-post:

Canada	21.1%
UK	19.7%
US	15.2%

Canada now ranks 42<sup>nd</sup> among democracies in the percentage of women in parliament. Compare the figures above with these other major western democracies using various forms of proportional representation:

Sweden	45.3%
Norway	37.9%
Finland	37.5%
Denmark	36.9%
Netherlands	36.7%
Spain	36.0%
Belgium	34.7%
Austria	33.9%
Iceland	33.3%
Germany	31.8%

In 1993, New Zealanders voted to switch from a Canadian-style first-past-the-post voting system to a mixed-member proportional system. The percentage of women elected in the first election under the new system jumped to a record 29%<sup>5</sup> and now stands at 32%.

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<sup>4</sup> As at November 30, 2005, as reported on the Inter-Parliamentary Union web site [www.ipu.org](http://www.ipu.org).

<sup>5</sup> Thérèse Arseneau, "Lessons from New Zealand", in *Making Every Vote Count*, 1999, Henry Milner, ed., p. 138.

## 5. DEMOCRACY DROP-OUTS: Citizens Vote “No Confidence” in the System

What happens when a voting system wastes votes, provides no representation for nearly half the voters, distorts election outcomes, and routinely creates phony majority governments? Not surprisingly, the motivation to vote is greatly reduced.

*Canada ranked 109<sup>th</sup> among 163 nations in voter turnout in the 1990s, just ahead of Fiji, in a dead heat with Benin, and slightly behind Lebanon. \*\**

Voter turnout in Canadian federal elections has been decreasing since 1988. The last three federal elections each set a new record low for voter turnout. The following chart shows the percentage of registered voters casting votes in recent elections.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Turnout</u>
1980	69.3%
1984	75.3%
1988	75.3%
1993	69.6%
1997	67.0%
2000	61.2%
2004	60.9%

*Countries using proportional voting systems have a 7.5% higher turnout than countries using winner-take-all systems. In Canadian terms that would represent another 1.7 million voters.*

A related trend is that we now have far fewer people voting for the winning party than not voting at all. In 1984, 37% of eligible voters voted for the winning party and 25% did not vote. In 2000, we had the reverse – 25% voted for the winning party, compared to 39% who did not vote.<sup>6</sup>

Countries with fair voting systems, based on proportional representation, tend to have higher voter turnouts.<sup>7</sup> Voting systems are certainly not the only variable affecting voter turnout, but systems that allow most voters to cast effective rather than wasted votes do have a positive effect.

<sup>6</sup> Centre for Research and Information on Canada, *Voter Participation in Canada: Is Canadian Democracy in Crisis?*, October 2001, p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*, 1999, Yale University Press. p. 285.

\*\* Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) web site: [www.idea.int/vt/index.cfm](http://www.idea.int/vt/index.cfm) – Canadian election statistics section.

## CONCLUSION: Every Citizen Will Matter When Every Vote Counts

Developed centuries ago, first-past-the-post voting was among the first crude attempts to design a means for the people, rather than absolute rulers, to make decisions. In its time, the system was a major step forward, given the form of decision making that it replaced – absolute rule by unaccountable despots and monarchs.

But time moved on. Democratic societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries found better and more democratic ways to allow citizens to choose their representatives.

Today, eighty-one countries, including most major democracies, use various types of proportional representation voting systems. That label, however, can be confusing because it describes election outcomes rather than the core principle.

The objective of proportional representation is to make every citizen matter by making every vote count.

The principle behind these voting systems is to get as close as possible to making every citizen's vote count. The goal is to maximize the number of citizens who can help elect the representatives they desire. The more votes that count, the more likely the results will be proportional – parties (or groups of like-minded citizens) will gain a portion of seats relatively equal to the portion of votes they receive. In other words, proportionality is the outcome when all voters are treated equally.

For the past 139 years, Canadians have suffered the consequences of using a primitive and dysfunctional voting system. As this report shows, our system routinely distorts results, wastes millions of votes, produces parliaments that are not reflective of the electorate, and exacerbates regional differences. If there were no other choice on how to run elections, perhaps we could turn a blind eye to these flaws. But there *are* choices. Most of Canada's international peers adopted proportional voting systems of various types between 50 and 100 years ago.

As we move further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Canada can no longer afford a dysfunctional voting system that produces unrepresentative and unaccountable governments. We can no longer afford citizen disengagement from the electoral system. We can no longer expect to thrive as a healthy modern society with a growing democratic malaise and a spiraling democracy deficit.

The only thing we can afford is to draw the line now and make January 23, 2006, the last unfair election.