

FAIR VOTE CANADA – FACT SHEET

Why is the Alternative Vote a phony reform?

Why is the Alternative Vote (or “preference voting” in single-member ridings) a phony reform? Similar to the current system, voters would elect a single MP from each riding. The difference is that voters would be allowed to rank candidates on the ballot.

To win a seat, the candidate must attract more than 50% of the ballots. If no candidate wins a majority of the first-choice votes, the least popular candidate is dropped. That candidate’s ballots are reassigned to the second choices, and so on, until one candidate has a majority of the ballots. Proponents say this ensures the winner has majority support.

Unfortunately, the Alternative Vote does nothing to fix the problems with the current system. In fact, it can make things worse.

- 1) Like our current system, the Alternative Vote is a winner-take-all system. In each riding, one group of voters elects an MP (and wins representation in Parliament) while all the other voters in that riding lose their right to representation.
- 2) Many voters are already in ridings where the MP is their second or third choice. That’s the problem, not the solution.
- 3) This system “guarantees” the winner has majority support? Counting ballots in a different manner does not magically produce a politician with majority support when it didn’t exist otherwise.
- 4) The Alternative Vote can actually distort election results more dramatically than our current system. For example, in the 1997 election the Liberals won 38% of the votes but captured 51% of the seats. A study of voter preferences¹ found the Liberals would have gained 57% of the seats, even with the same level of support, had the Alternative Vote been used. Why? When forced to rank parties, most voters who supported other parties would have ranked the Liberals second, not because they wanted Liberal representation, but because they disliked other parties even more.
- 5) Not surprising, due to these shortcomings, only 3 of 211 countries in the world use this system to elect their parliaments (Australia, Papua New Guinea, Fiji).

¹ L’impact mécanique du vote alternatif au Canada: une simulation des élections de 1997, by Antoine Bilodeau, Canadian Journal of Political Science, December 1999.