



Fair Le Mouvement pour
Vote la représentation équitable
Canada au Canada

THIS IS DEMOCRACY?

THE HEART OF CANADA'S DEMOCRACY DEFICIT: AN UNFAIR VOTING SYSTEM

The voting system is the heart of representative democracy. It's the tool citizens use to create government by the people, for the people, of the people.

A good voting system gives every citizen an equal vote. When every citizen's vote has equal value, then parliaments can reflect the political will of the people.

If the voting system ignores or distorts what voters say, then democracy is compromised. Parliaments are not representative and governments cannot be properly accountable.

This is the core problem with the Canadian political system. Our 21st century democracy is hobbled with a dysfunctional 12th century voting system.¹

This system, usually called first-past-the-post (or more formally: single member plurality) was long ago scrapped by most other major democracies.

"The current electoral system no longer responds to 21st century Canadian democratic values."

*Law Commission of Canada
"Voting Counts: Electoral Reform for
Canada" (2004)*

1-Minute Democracy Quiz

Which of the following statements about Canadian elections are true?

1. Every vote is equal - it doesn't matter who you support or where you live.
True False
2. Election results are fair - what we say at the ballot box is what we get.
True False
3. A party must win a majority of votes to form a majority government.
True False
4. Government is always formed by the party that wins the most votes.
True False
5. Voters who oppose the government are always represented by one or more opposition parties.
True False
6. Canada has more women in parliament than either Turkmenistan, Laos or Eritrea.
True False
7. Canada ranked 108th in the world in voter turnout in the 1990s.
True False
8. Most older European nations use antiquated 12th century voting systems, while Canada uses a modern 20th century voting system.
True False

Answers on page 5.

¹ While the exact origin of first-past-the-post voting is unknown, electoral systems expert Pippa Norris states the system dates back to at least the 12th century: "Electoral Engineering: Voting Rules and Political Behavior" (2004), p. 42.

WINNER-TAKE-ALL: MILLIONS CAST WASTED VOTES

Canada's current system is based on the winner-take-all principle. It's just what it says. In each riding, one group of voters wins - their votes send an MP to Parliament. Every other voter in that riding loses. Their votes elect no one to represent them in Parliament. They cast wasted votes.

"In a democratic government, the right of decision belongs to the majority, but the right of representation belongs to all."

Ernest Naville, 1865

The only voters sending MPs to Ottawa are those who support the most popular party in their riding. In other words, your political beliefs and place of residence determine whether your vote counts. If you hold the "wrong" political views or live in the "wrong" place, your vote means nothing.

In a typical federal election, about six million Canadians, or just under half of those voting, cast wasted votes.²

What happens in a system that wastes most votes? Some voters feel pressured to vote against a party they fear rather than for a party they actually support. But many more people just stop voting. The June 2004 federal election set another record for the lowest turn-out in Canadian history.

Given the way the system treats voters, it is not surprising that 40% of registered voters are not voting - it's surprising that 60% still are.

If we asked Canadians who cast wasted votes in the last election to form a line beginning in Halifax, the line would stretch across the country to Victoria and then far, far into the Pacific Ocean.

ALL VOTES ARE NOT EQUAL

Under the current voting system, the value of our votes depends on what party we happen to support in an election.

In the last federal election, the Bloc gained an average of one seat in Parliament for every 31,000 votes cast for their party. At the other end of the spectrum, the NDP won only one seat for every 111,000 votes. In other words, Bloc supporters were almost four times as likely to be represented as NDP supporters.

But these national results mask how the system works against supporters of all parties.

Consider the plight of Liberal voters in the west. In the three prairie provinces, twice as many voted Conservative as Liberal, but the Conservative voters elected seven times as many MPs. Now consider the plight of Conservative voters in Quebec, where more than 300,000 were unable to elect a single MP, compared to 178,000 fellow Conservatives in Saskatchewan who elected 13 MPs.

Then consider the 580,000 Green supporters across Canada who didn't elect a single MP, while fewer than 500,000 Liberals in Atlantic Canada alone were able to elect 22 MPs. The 2.1 million NDP voters may wonder why they elected only 19 MPs when fewer than 1.7 million Bloc supporters elected 54 MPs.

Average votes per party to gain one seat in Parliament (2004 Federal election)

1 = 31,000 Bloc
1 = 37,000 Liberal
1 = 40,000 Conservative
1 = 111,000 NDP
0 = 580,000 Green

Note: *These national averages mask other inequities, such as the plight of Liberal voters in the west and Conservative voters in the east. In fact, 70% of the 5.6 million wasted votes were cast by supporters of the Liberals and Conservatives.*

² Ironically, our system also ignores votes for candidates or parties that are "too popular" in a single riding. In one riding, an MP may be elected with less than 40% of the vote. In another riding, 80% of the voters may support the same party, but still elect just one MP.

PHONY MAJORITIES WITH PHONY MANDATES

What happens when the voting system doesn't treat all votes equally? Election results are distorted. Voters say one thing at the ballot box and they get something far different. In fact, one of the most fundamental democratic principles - majority rule - is subverted.

Since World War I, Canada has had 15 "majority" governments. In each case, one party held a majority of seats and exercised 100 per cent of the power.

But how many of these governments actually won a majority of the popular vote? Only four. Four legitimate majority governments over the past eight decades!

True Majorities	Phony Majorities		
1940	1930	1968	1993
1949	1935	1974	1997
1958	1945	1980	2000
1984	1953	1988	

And it's getting worse, not better. Since the mid-1960s, Canada has had eight "majority" governments, with only one receiving support by a majority of voters, and that one just by a hair. In fact, in 1997, the Liberals formed a majority government with only 39 per cent of the popular vote.

In addition to phony majority governments, we often have exaggerated majorities. Such is the case currently in B.C., Alberta and PEI, where supporters of opposition parties have little representation. In B.C., the opposition, representing 43% of voters, consists of just two MLAs.

The most outrageous distortion in the 1990s occurred in two provincial elections where parties second in the popular vote actually formed "majority" governments!

LOW VOTER TURNOUT

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, many simply stop voting.

Voter turnout in Canadian federal elections has been decreasing since 1988, setting yet another all-time record low in 2004. The following chart shows the percentage of registered voters casting votes in recent elections.

LOW VOTER TURNOUT

YEAR	TURNOUT
1980	69.3%
1984	75.3%
1988	75.3%
1993	69.6%
1997	67.0%
2000	61.2%
2004	60.5%

Countries using fair voting systems have higher voter turnout. Based on international experience, if Canada switched to some form of proportional representation, we could expect another 1.5 million or more additional voters to participate.

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

POOR REPRESENTATION

Can it get any worse? Unfortunately, yes. Compared to European nations, Canada has a very low percentage of women in Parliament. Visible minorities, despite being a growing segment of society, also hold relatively few seats, and very few aboriginal people serve in Parliament.

Every voting system provides certain incentives to parties regarding candidate selection. Our winner-take-all system, with just one winner per riding, rewards political parties for putting forward the one candidate considered most likely to win.

The systems used in most major democracies usually have a number of MPs elected from larger ridings (or electoral districts). For example, if voters elect 7 MPs from their district, each party will bring forward a list of 7 candidates. This changes the incentive. Now parties are more likely to attract votes by presenting a diverse list of candidates that reflects all people in that region.

Women in National Parliaments: Percentage of Women in Lower or Single Houses

Data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (31 March 2004)

Compare the three remaining major Western democracies using single member plurality (or first-past-the-post) systems:

<i>Canada</i>	<i>20.6%</i>
<i>United Kingdom</i>	<i>17.9% *</i>
<i>United States</i>	<i>14.3%</i>

...with major Western democracies using various forms of proportional representation:

<i>Sweden</i>	<i>45.3%</i>
<i>Denmark</i>	<i>38.0%</i>
<i>Finland</i>	<i>37.5%</i>
<i>Netherlands</i>	<i>36.7%</i>
<i>Norway</i>	<i>36.4%</i>
<i>Spain</i>	<i>36.0%</i>
<i>Belgium</i>	<i>35.3%</i>
<i>Austria</i>	<i>33.9%</i>
<i>Germany</i>	<i>32.2%</i>
<i>Iceland</i>	<i>30.2%</i>

** Unlike the British Parliament, the Scottish and Welsh assembly elections use proportional systems and have 40% and 50% women respectively.*

EXAGGERATED REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

Canada's voting system also provides seat bonuses for regional parties and rewards national parties for concentrating on a specific region. A party with voter support concentrated in one region of the country will gain far more seats than another party with the same number of supporters spread across the nation. As a result, the Canadian political system is comprised of parties that unfairly dominate certain regions of the country, with little or no representation in other areas. Government and opposition caucuses seldom have strong representation from all parts of the country.

Canada's electoral map makes it appear as though a huge majority of Western Canadians are Conservative, when half vote for other parties.

The map also suggests that a huge majority of Ontarians are Liberal supporters when half of Ontarians vote for other parties.

While there are regional differences in Canada, the voting system wildly exaggerates these differences and hinders representation for the diversity of views in all parts of the country.

"Canada has real enough regional fault lines. But the first-past-the-post formula for representation widens and exacerbates these...it has already caused us incalculable harm. If it is not soon changed, one day it will kill us."

*Andrew Coyne,
National Post, July 3, 2004*

TODAY'S SYSTEM: A MOCKERY OF DEMOCRACY

Millions of wasted votes. Voters not treated equally. Distorted election outcomes. Parliaments controlled by phony majority governments. Poor representation for women and visible minorities. Exaggerated regional differences. Declining voter turnout.

Is that a recipe for representative and accountable government? Is that the foundation for a 21st century Canadian democracy?

Today's voting system is a mockery of democracy. Reform is not only necessary, but an urgent priority for our country.

"A national consensus is building around the idea that our democracy needs to be fixed - that the first-past-the-post method of electing Parliament is grossly undemocratic."

*Anthony Westell, June 6, 2001
Globe & Mail Column*

"Ever get the feeling you've been cheated?"

*Johnny Rotten,
The Sex Pistols*

ANSWERS TO 1-MINUTE QUIZ

1. **False:** see page 2.
2. **False:** see page 3.
3. **False:** see page 3.
4. **False:** in the 1990s, three provincial governments were formed by parties that finished second in the popular vote.
5. **False:** in NB in 1987, the Liberals won every seat with just 60% of the vote.
6. **False.**
7. **False:** Canada ranked 109th in voter turnout in the 1990s.
8. **False:** most older European countries use voting systems developed in the 20th century, while Canada uses a system developed in the 12th century.



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