

How the Mixed-Member proportional system recommended by the Citizens' Assembly can make a difference for women.

First of all, our new system will be similar to the one we already have in that we will still have ridings as usual; however, instead of 107 (increased from the current 103 this October), there will be 90 constituencies. The feature of most interest to women is the addition of 39 at-large members who are representatives from across the province not directly attached to a specific riding. This is what "mixed member" means—a mix of constituency and at-large members. The combination of the two types gives a total of 129 MPPs, restoring the numbers cut back in the 1990s.

So what happens on election day in our new MMP system? Each voter gets one ballot but two votes. The first vote is for the local candidate; you select a candidate in your riding just as you would now. The second vote is the critical one. You choose your preferred party. Under this system, you can choose the local candidate even if that candidate is not in the party of your choice. You can split your vote. You can vote sincerely for your party, confident that your vote will accurately count toward your party getting representatives in proportion to the number of people across the province who voted for the party. It is this second vote that provides overall proportionality and it is, therefore, the more significant of the two.

Before the election, local ridings will nominate candidates as usual. At the same time, each party will nominate their list of 39 at-large candidates in a transparent, democratic process—usually at a party convention. The most valuable candidates will be placed at the top of the list and will be the ones most likely to go to the legislature depending on what proportion of the popular vote the party is able to attract. Each party is held responsible for the diversity and geographic balance of its list and is accountable to voters for its composition.

If a party has a fair number of capable women on the list and they are placed near the top, it is a good indication that it is serious about electing women. However, if a party has fewer women on its list overall and places mostly men near the top, that might indicate to you the opposite. In many European countries, parties will often "zipper" their lists, alternating male and female names throughout the length of the lists so that equal numbers are elected. In any case, the visual appearance of the list is critical because it shows if a party is serious about nominating women. Parties are competitive and once they realize that they are losing votes by not diversifying their lists, they start to add more women and the number of women increases over all parties over time.

No system is perfect. And no system will work exactly the same in every country. But one thing about which the literature is very clear: voting systems do matter for women. Our greatest impediment to electing more women is our current system. It is not the only factor but changing to a more proportional system is the necessary first step. The role of women and women's groups in encouraging parties to place women high on these lists is critical in order to take advantage of the "opportunity structures" that the lists provide. More men will still be elected in the ridings but as more women are elected from the list, they will become household names and will potentially compete in their own ridings as has happened in other countries. It will take several election cycles for Ontario women to become familiar with how the system works for them but improvements for women over time will occur.

Since New Zealand's first MMP election in 1993, the number of women has gradually increased so they now rank 15th in the world with 32% women. Canada's international ranking continues to decline and we are currently at 49%, trailing countries such as Pakistan, Iraq, Namibia and Afghanistan. By changing the system here in Ontario, we will send a signal to the rest of the country and the federal level that the status quo has to go. Ontario and Canadian women deserve better representation.

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