

Why women should vote YES in the up-coming referendum.

October 10 promises to be a memorable date for the women of Ontario. If the recommendation of the Ontario Citizen's Assembly is accepted in the referendum being held on that day, we will likely see more women and minorities elected to the Ontario legislature. The new system of voting is called Mixed Member Proportional or MMP for short and is similar to the system used in Germany, New Zealand, Scotland and Wales.

This is a rare event that many Ontarians do not yet know about but will soon. It is special in that citizens are seldom given the opportunity to change how they elect their representatives. It is wonderful opportunity to make our system better represent us.

We are asking women to vote "Yes" on October 10. Changing to the system recommended by the Assembly has the power to affect our lives positively and it is important that women understand this connection. A recent study has shown that women, by seven percentage points more than men are likely to support voting system change so women have the numbers and power to make this happen.

Why our present system no longer works for us and does not elect many women.

We are so accustomed to how we vote, that we find it hard to imagine that most countries in the world do not elect their representatives as we do. But Canada is part of a dwindling group of countries using our first-past-the-post system, and no new country chooses our system for their way to vote. Our current system is designed for two parties but since we prefer to vote for three or more parties, no one party gets a clear majority. This means since 1937 no party taking power has done so with majority support—some parties have governed with as little as 38% of the vote. The majority did not want them elected; yet these parties have ruled as if they had a majority, often enacting unpopular legislation. The voting system gave them their authority, not the people.

This situation causes major distortions in our democratic system and some feel it leads to our record-low voter turnout. Many people vote all their lives and become discouraged since their preferred party never gets in their riding—this happens to over 50% of us election after election. These are called wasted votes—a term used by political scientists to describe votes cast that do not contribute to electing anyone. In New Zealand, under their MMP system, only 2% of votes are wasted and people there can be confident that their policy preferences will be accurately reflected in the makeup of the new parliament.

But most importantly, the impact of this system on women and minorities is profound. Under our system, we rarely elect more than 20-25% women. At the federal level, we have hit a glass ceiling and have actually started to decline. The United Nations has noted that we need at least 30% women at the table to have our voices heard. Others say, given our diversity, we need 40%. It is no wonder that policy issues that pertain to women are not given much attention.

In a country where 52% of the population are women, this is a serious lack of representation. Numerous researchers have clearly laid the blame on our single-member riding system. Each riding association, often comprised of scarcely 200-300 individuals, chooses our representatives. Eighty percent of the time it is not a woman. The rationale is since there is only one person that can be elected in each constituency, the person the electorate is most likely to accept is a middle-aged, white male. This goes against recent evidence that finds that 90% of Canadians want to elect more women. It also goes against the fact that women are legitimate communities of interests—they have policy concerns that differ from those of men. This nomination process is often quixotic and not transparent—frequently woman candidates have a hard time discovering the rules under which they are to run. Even the undemocratic senate has more women than our current supposedly democratic voting system produces for our legislatures.

Arrend Lijphart, a highly respected political scientist, claims that the representation of women is a proxy for the representation of other groups. So if we change the conditions for women, we can also effect change for a myriad of other groups, which are underrepresented.

How the Citizens' Assembly MMP system 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 ridings. In essence the equivalent of every six ridings will be rolled into five. 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 members of the legislature, 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 and you select a candidate in your riding just as you would now. The second vote is the critical one. You choose your preferred party. Suppose you really like your local candidate but not the candidate's party. Under this system, you can choose the local candidate but you can also choose your party. 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 your second vote that provides proportionality and it is, therefore, the more significant vote 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 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. As a voter, you can better decide which party you intend to support by examining each party's list. Each party is held responsible for the diversity 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 visual indication that that party 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 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 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 elected 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.