

# AN ELECTORAL SYSTEM FOR ALL

Why Canada should adopt  
proportional representation

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MARCH 2016

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The **BROADBENT INSTITUTE** is an independent, nonpartisan organization championing progressive change through the promotion of democracy, equality, and sustainability and the training of a new generation of leaders.

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## INTRODUCTION

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Democracy in Canada is at a critical juncture. The Liberal government has committed to moving beyond our first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system and replacing it with something better suited to democracy in the 21st century.

In fact, during the 2015 election, the Liberal Party promised that it would be the last election conducted under the current system. This means that Canadians now have an opportunity that few in this country have genuinely had before: We can help decide how members of Parliament are elected. Moreover, we can choose a system that will serve and represent Canadians fairly and equally while better engaging them in the political process. And that's a system based on proportional representation.

## 1.0 CANADA'S HISTORIC MOMENT

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Electoral systems matter. As a series of rules or procedures for determining who gets to hold office—when, for how long, and under what conditions—an electoral system has an important effect on how politics is practiced and how a country functions.

These effects include who gets represented and by whom, which sorts of policies a government pursues, and even how involved citizens become in the life of their democracy.

So, we should think carefully about how we choose to elect our representatives. When asked why we have the system we do, we should have good reasons; and we should know the advantages (and disadvantages) that the alternatives offer. Since the sort of electoral system we use is a fundamental component of our democracy, we should treat it as such.

### **CANADA'S HORSE RACE**

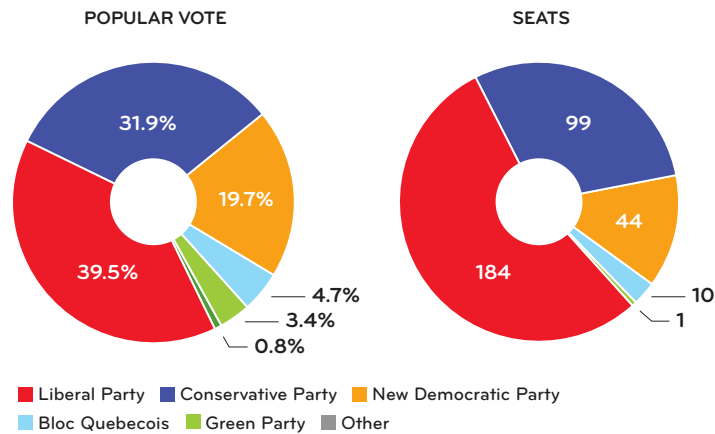
Our current electoral system has been with us since before Confederation. That is, since before 1867. Before automobiles took over our streets, before light bulbs lit our rooms, and before tin cans filled our shelves. It is, with few exceptions, the process we have always used to elect legislatures in Canada.<sup>1</sup> As a colony, we inherited the system from the United Kingdom, along with an unelected upper chamber (the Senate), the common law tradition, and many other legal, political, and cultural practices and institutions. The name “first-past-the-post” comes from a reference to horse racing, where the first horse to reach the finish line—or the “post”—wins. That horse gets to bask in sweet equine glory while the other horses return to the stable, heads hung low in shame.

Formally, FPTP is known as single-member plurality, since each riding or voting district elects a single member of Parliament, who is the candidate who receives the most votes during an election—though not necessarily a majority. In fact, in Canada, the winning candidate usually fails to receive a majority of votes cast. In the 2015 federal election, only 131 of 338 candidates received a majority of votes.

One winner, Brigitte Sansoucy, now the New Democratic Party member of Parliament for Quebec's Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot riding, won with 28.5 per cent of the vote. In the Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup riding, Conservative MP Bernard Généreux won with just 29 per cent.

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FIGURE 1. BREAKDOWN OF SEAT COUNT AND POPULAR VOTE BY PARTY, 2015



The Liberal Party was also a beneficiary of the plurality rule, with Denis Lemieux winning the Chicoutimi—Le Fjord riding with 31 per cent.

In the same election, the Liberal Party won a majority government of 184 seats (out of 338) with 39.5 per cent of the popular vote. When this happens, it's sometimes called a "false majority."<sup>2</sup> Essentially, this false majority gives the Liberals overwhelming control of the House of Commons and the parliamentary agenda; it also gives them the ability to win nearly any vote they wish, regardless of the fact that more than 60 per cent of Canadians voted for one of the opposition parties.

If this outcome seems imbalanced or unfair to you, keep in mind that previous election results have been even more distorted. In 1896, Charles Tupper's Conservative Party lost the election to Wilfrid Laurier's Liberals despite besting them in the popular vote (the total vote share). Laurier even ended up with a majority government. And his face on the five-dollar bill.

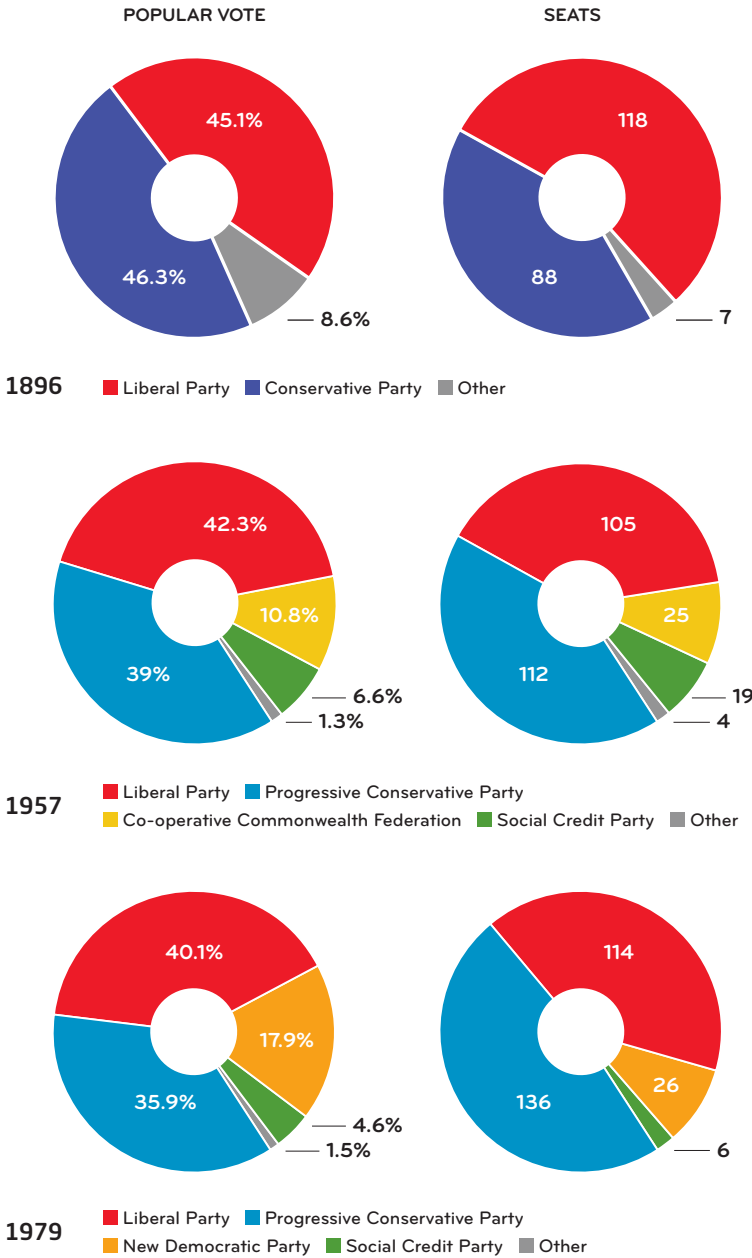
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**“Our current electoral system has been with us since before Confederation. That is, since before 1867. Before automobiles took over our streets, before light bulbs lit our rooms, and before tin cans filled our shelves.”**

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This happened again in 1957 and 1979. Once more, and once more again, the party with the second-highest vote share won the election. In each of these two cases, the winner came away with a minority government, having won less than half of the seats in the House of Commons, but more than any other party. In the case of the 1979 election, Pierre Trudeau, who was the Liberal Party leader at the time, lost the election to Joe Clark and his Conservatives despite receiving a hefty 482,760 more votes.

**FIGURE 2. BREAKDOWN OF SEAT COUNT AND POPULAR VOTE BY PARTY:**  
1896, 1957, 1979



## BETTER WAYS TO DIVIDE THE PIE

What if we imagined an election not as a horse race to be won or lost by one candidate or party, but as a pie to be divided? An electoral system based on or including elements of proportional representation (PR) is designed to ensure that the number of seats a party wins closely matches the percentage of votes it receives. If this idea seems fair and intuitive, that's because it is. It's in part for this reason<sup>3</sup> that proportional electoral systems are the most commonly used systems in the world. In some countries with PR, there are few districts, while some have many more. For Canada, given that we are a large, highly diverse country in which many citizens, especially outside of our larger cities, have a strong attachment to geographical representation, any form of PR would likely include representation in local ridings, though they would probably be bigger than they are now.

A quick glance at the [ACE Electoral Knowledge Network electoral systems map](#) shows that about 38 per cent of countries use some form of PR—including approximately 85 per cent of countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In comparison, 26 per cent of countries throughout the world use FPTP, many of which are countries that also inherited the system from Great Britain.

Old habits die hard. But in the 21st century, attitudes towards politics and democratic sensibilities have evolved to include more robust commitments to fairness, representativeness, and engagement. FPTP seems increasingly dusty in a world where our expectations for democracy are changing, fewer and fewer countries are using FPTP, and countries such as Canada have more than two major political parties.

Elections under PR aren't horse races—they're shared pies. Each party that receives a certain minimum level of support gets a piece. While FPTP is a winner-take-all system, leaving nothing for those who fail to win, PR ensures that as many votes as possible count, and that election results closely match the popular vote. So, if a party wins 30 per cent of the vote, it receives roughly 30 per cent of the seats.

### DID YOU KNOW?

During recent national elections in Canada, between seven and nine million votes in each contest were “wasted”—cast for a candidate who didn't win. That's more people than the populations of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Prince Edward Island combined who ended up with a member of Parliament they didn't vote for. That's a population equivalent of more than all the citizens of four provinces whose votes, effectively, didn't matter.

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### **POPULAR SUPPORT FOR ELECTORAL REFORM**

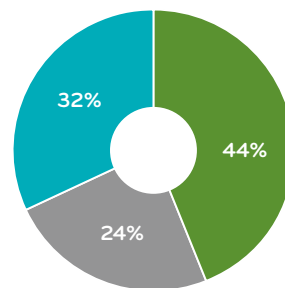
In December 2015, Abacus Data released [a landmark poll](#) commissioned by the Broadbent Institute. It found that while some Canadians—17 per cent—are comfortable with the current system, a majority believe that our electoral system needs some kind of change. This includes 42 per cent who said there need to be major or complete changes to the system. It’s little wonder that this is the case. The poll also showed that 38 per cent of respondents have either considered not voting or have stayed home because they felt that their vote wouldn’t change the outcome of their local election. And nearly half of Canadians—46 per cent—indicated that they had voted for a party that wasn’t their first choice in order to prevent another party from winning (that is, they voted “strategically”).

All of this might help explain why Canadians, by nearly a two-to-one margin (44 per cent to 24 per cent), believe that the Trudeau government should make good on its election promise to change the electoral system. However, 32 per cent had no clear views. Furthermore, 52 per cent of respondents indicated that electoral reform wasn’t important to them, including 12 per cent who “couldn’t care less” about it. This suggests that there’s an important opportunity to reach out to and engage Canadians on an issue that affects us all.

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FIGURE 3.

**Do you personally think that the Liberal government should change Canada’s voting system, that it should keep the existing system, or you have no clear views on this?**



■ Should change ■ Should keep the existing system ■ No clear views



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**“Today, a rare and critical window is open for Canadians to advocate for an electoral system that includes proportionality, and to seize the opportunity for change.”**

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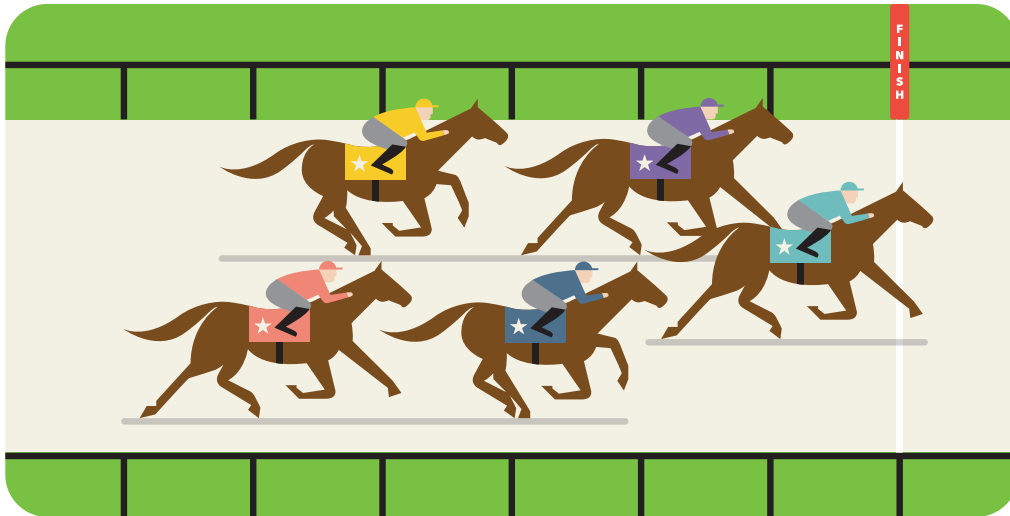
Respondents identified a variety of features they want out of an electoral system. They tended to favour an electoral system that has a simple ballot and that produces strong, stable governments with a local member of Parliament—features consistent with FPTP, but that can also be features of PR systems. However, many also indicated a desire for a system in which the makeup of Parliament reflects the support a party has throughout the country and in which seats won in Parliament reflect the proportion of votes each party receives nationally—two things our current system does not do well, but that PR does very well.

When asked which electoral system they preferred, 44 per cent of respondents chose a proportional system—either pure proportional representation or a mixed-member system—and 43 per cent chose the current system. This indicates a pretty stark divide between FPTP and PR proponents, though we can't be sure how deep or persistent that divide is. What we do know is that the system we now use is more familiar to Canadians, and that people tend to prefer things that are familiar to them. It's likely true that the more Canadians learn about proportional representation, the more they will become comfortable with it, especially once they learn about the virtues of proportionality: fairness, representativeness, and engagement.

Today, a rare and critical window is open for Canadians to engage in the debate over electoral reform, to advocate for an electoral system that includes proportionality, and to seize the opportunity for change.

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

When citizens of Ontario and British Columbia participating in province-wide citizen assemblies were asked to come up with alternatives to the current system, they chose proportional systems. So did the citizens of New Zealand in the 1990s. Even the Law Commission of Canada, back in 2004, recommended that Canada introduce proportionality to its electoral system, just as many democracies throughout the world have done.



## 2.0 WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE CURRENT SYSTEM?

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Our FPTP system does a bad job at translating the votes of Canadians into a distribution of seats that matches the preferences of voters. Instead, it produces distorted outcomes, perverse incentives, and wasted votes. It's unfair, it's unrepresentative of certain populations, and it contributes to disengagement.

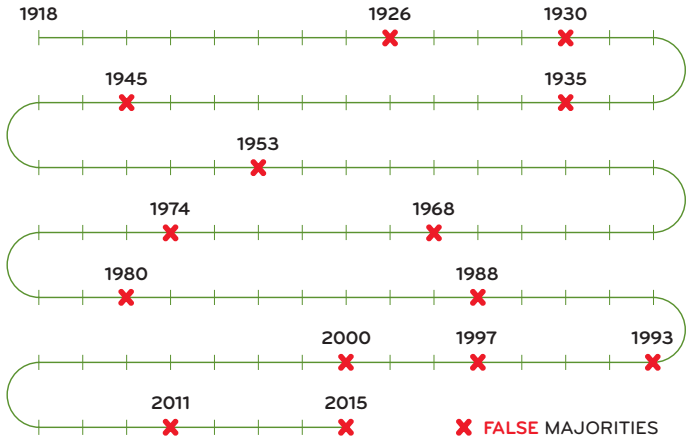
Let's use an example that clearly shows how unfair FPTP can be. Say Lucy, John, and Hans are running against one another in a riding. Lucy gets 13,200 votes, John gets 13,000 votes, and Hans gets 12,900 (it's a very divided riding). Lucy is declared the winner and given full control of a single seat in Parliament, despite it being a close race. John and Hans get nothing despite receiving many votes, and their supporters (nearly two-thirds of all voters) are left with a representative they did not vote for. This example indicates a phenomenon that's not uncommon in Canada.

Plenty of races are won by a narrow margin with losing candidates receiving significant support. Some are close two-way races, some are close three-way races, and occasionally, there are even close four-way races. But winning candidates often come away with full control of a single seat in their district after winning by a narrow margin. In 2011, for instance, 93 seats—nearly a third of all seats—were won by a margin of 10 per cent or less, including 52 that were won by five per cent or less. In the 2015 contest, there were 22 ridings where the margin of victory was [1.5 per cent or less](#), including one race where the winning margin was 0.1 per cent.

When a result like the example above happens in a single riding, it's a bad day for the losing candidate or candidates and those who voted for them. But when it happens across the country, it produces a pronounced distorted outcome: a false majority. This is when a party receives a majority of seats in Parliament without a majority of the popular vote. And it happens a lot. In fact, since the end of the First World War—around the time when third parties became more established—Canadian elections have produced 18 majority governments, and only *four* of those received a majority of the popular vote.

That's because in each riding, there tend to be more than two candidates—it's not unusual to see several candidates on the ballot. In 2015, there were [23 parties registered with Elections Canada](#), though most didn't run candidates in every riding. Because the vote gets divided among several candidates, individual candidates can win with returns in the 30 per cent range, or even lower. When this occurs across hundreds of ridings, millions of votes are wasted and parties come away with majority governments with far less than 50 per cent of the vote. For example, in 1997, the Liberal Party won a majority government, taking 52 per cent of seats. However, it only won 38.5 per cent of the popular vote. In 2011, the Conservative Party pulled off a similar feat, with 54 per cent of seats from a less-than-robust 40 per cent of the popular vote, just like the Liberals in 2015 (who received 54 per cent of the seats with 39.5 per cent of the popular vote).

FIGURE 4. FALSE MAJORITIES IN FEDERAL ELECTIONS SINCE END OF WWI

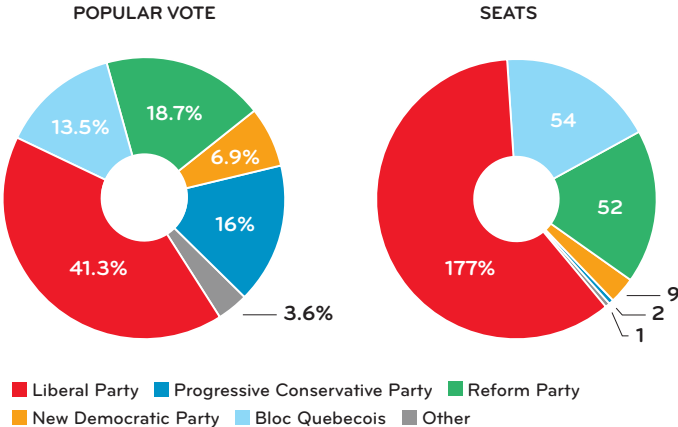


Aside from false majorities, our current system can also result in distorted outcomes for opposition or third parties, while entirely shutting out smaller parties. In 1997, the Reform Party and the Progressive Conservative Party received almost the same share of votes—the Reform Party received less than one per cent more than the Progressive Conservative Party. However, the Reform Party won 40 more seats. And in the same election, the Bloc Québécois, whose support was geographically concentrated in Quebec, [won twice as many seats as the New Democrats](#), despite receiving *fewer votes*.

Results like this happen because FPTP tends to punish small parties whose support is spread out across the country, while it rewards those whose support is geographically concentrated (and it can have the opposite effect on large parties). That’s how the Bloc Québécois became the Official Opposition in 1993 despite electing no members of Parliament outside Quebec, receiving *less than 14 per cent of the popular vote*, and taking in fewer votes (by more than 700,000) than the third-place Reform Party. It’s also how the Green Party of Canada, whose support is more geographically spread out, has received only one seat in two of the last five elections, and none in the other three, despite receiving between three and seven per cent of votes cast in each contest. (In a proportional system with similar popular returns, the party would likely have come away with 10–20 seats.)

Not only does this phenomenon punish certain parties, but it also generates regional tensions. Former Liberal Party leader and current Foreign Affairs Minister Stéphane Dion, who was very engaged in this country’s debates over national unity, [wrote in an op-ed for the \*National Post\*](#) that FPTP “weakens Canada’s cohesion” and “artificially amplifies the regional concentration of political party support at the federal level. With 50% of the vote in a given province, a federal party could end up taking almost all the seats. But with 20% of the vote, it may end up not winning any seats at all. This is how Ontario appeared more Liberal than it really was, Alberta more Reform-Conservative, Quebec more Bloc, etc.”

FIGURE 5. ELECTION RESULTS BY PARTY, POPULAR VOTE: 1993 FEDERAL ELECTION



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**“Aside from false majorities, our current system can also result in distorted outcomes for opposition or third parties, while entirely shutting out smaller parties.”**

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Unsurprisingly, with outcomes like these, the system seems unfair to many. Such perceptions could have an impact on voter turnout and political attitudes towards the system. Globally, proportional systems tend to increase voter turnout by between five and seven per cent (Blais and Carty 1990; Lijphart 2012; Radcliff and Davis 2000).<sup>4</sup> One possible explanation for this is that since fewer votes are wasted in PR systems, citizens have more incentive to vote.

Distorted outcomes and wasted votes not only correlate with, and possibly cause, lower voter turnout, but may also lead to lower perceptions of fairness, efficacy, and the responsiveness of the system—especially among those who tend to get shut out of the current system. They certainly result in fewer women being elected (and sometimes candidates from minority backgrounds, though FPTP can also favour candidates from minority groups that are geographically concentrated).

PR can help address each of these challenges. But more on this later. First, we need to have a closer look at what PR is, how it works, and where it is used throughout the world.



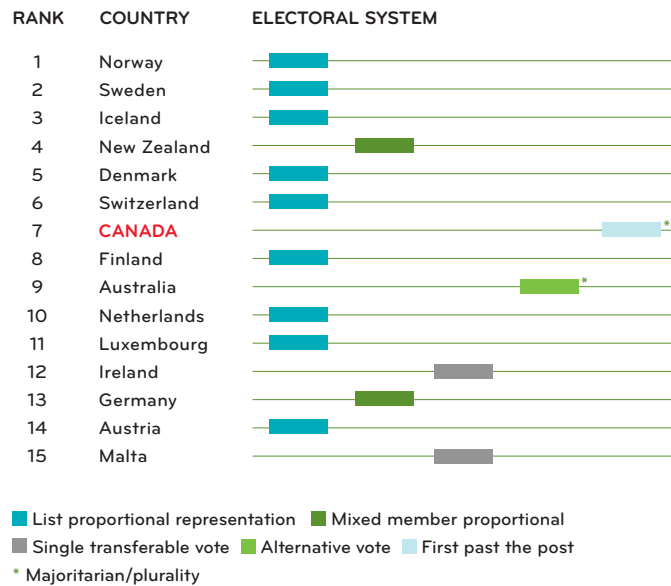
### 3.0 WHAT'S PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION?

Proportional representation electoral systems are the most commonly used systems in the world.

Thirty-five per cent of countries use a list (or “pure”) proportional system (which we’ll talk more about later in this section) to elect the first chamber of their national legislature (e.g., the House of Commons) (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network: Comparative Data). If you include other forms of PR and parallel systems (i.e., systems that use both PR and some other form separately), that number goes up to 52 per cent. So, as unfamiliar as proportional representation might seem to Canadians, globally, the system is familiar and common.

Granted, FPTP is used in democracies that most Canadians will be familiar with: the United Kingdom and the United States. However, aside from these countries and Canada, the majority of full democracies,<sup>5</sup> as [ranked by the Economist Intelligence Unit in 2014](#), use PR or a mixed system. This list includes Germany, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Norway, New Zealand, Uruguay, Ireland, Spain, Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and Switzerland.

**FIGURE 6. RANKED DEMOCRACIES AND ELECTORAL SYSTEM USED TO ELECT MAIN LEGISLATIVE CHAMBERS**



## VARIETIES OF PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

There are three main forms of proportional or mixed electoral systems, and there are variations within each form. Countless books, papers, pamphlets, and guides have been written about the various ways to design an electoral system. For our purposes, it’s sufficient to look at the most common versions of the top three systems: list, single transferable vote, and mixed-member. If Canada were to adopt a proportional system, it’s highly likely that it would be some version of one of these three systems, each of which is compatible with having multiple ridings and local representation across the country.

### LIST PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION: OPEN AND CLOSED

The list variant is the simplest and most common form of PR, [used by 84 countries around the world](#). With list PR, parties (and sometimes candidates, too) are listed on the ballot. Seats in the legislature are apportioned depending on the percentage of the vote received by each party (which sometimes includes a vote for a candidate—or candidates—as a representative of that party).

Typically, parties must meet a threshold—such as four or five per cent of the total vote in a district or nationally—in order to gain a seat. This prevents parties with very little support from winning seats, and helps keep the legislature from becoming too fragmented, especially if the number of elected representatives in each riding (known as “district magnitude”) remains in the low-to-mid range of about four to six members (Carey and Hix 2011).<sup>6</sup> With list PR, each riding or district elects multiple members of Parliament.

FIGURE 7A. OPEN LIST PR BALLOT

**OPEN LIST BALLOT**

CHOOSE ONE CANDIDATE BELOW

Your vote counts as both a vote for the candidate and that candidate's party

A. POOL PARTY	B. PIZZA PARTY	C. SLUMBER PARTY	D. DANCE PARTY
<input type="checkbox"/> Frederic LEGER	<input type="checkbox"/> Amira AHMAD	<input type="checkbox"/> Jelena RISEK	<input type="checkbox"/> Jeanne TERRIEN
<input type="checkbox"/> David GOLDBLOOM	<input type="checkbox"/> Phyllis STEIN	<input type="checkbox"/> Karin LOTZ	<input type="checkbox"/> Louis SACHS
<input type="checkbox"/> Maryssa NG	<input type="checkbox"/> Andrew WILSON	<input type="checkbox"/> Tim O'REILLY	
<input type="checkbox"/> Catherine GALIPEAU	<input type="checkbox"/> Natalie KOHN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Jeffrey LEBOWSKI	
<input type="checkbox"/> Aminah ABDUL	<input type="checkbox"/> Daniel KIM	<input type="checkbox"/> Dominic COUTURIER	

FIGURE 7B. CLOSED LIST PR BALLOT

**CLOSED LIST BALLOT**

Vote only once by putting a cross  in the box next to your choice

<p><b>A. POOL PARTY</b></p> <p>1. Frederic LEGER 2. David GOLDBLOOM 3. Marissa NG</p> <p>4. Catherine GALIPEAU 5. Aminah ABDUL</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p><b>B. PIZZA PARTY</b></p> <p>1. Amira AHMAD 2. Phyllis STEIN 3. Andrew WILSON</p> <p>4. Natalie KOHN 5. Daniel KIM</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p><b>C. SLUMBER PARTY</b></p> <p>1. Jelena RISEK 2. Karin LOTZ 3. Tim O'REILLY</p> <p>4. Jeffrey LEBOWSKI 5. Dominic COUTURIER</p>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<p><b>D. DANCE PARTY</b></p> <p>1. Jeanne TERRIEN 2. Louis SACHS</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>



There are two types of list PR: open list and closed list. Each determines in a different way which candidates from each party are elected. With open list PR, voters are able to choose which specific candidate they prefer. Their vote counts as both a vote for that candidate and for the party he or she represents. When the votes are counted, the parties still receive a proportional share of seats based on their share of the vote, and party candidates with the most votes are elected to fill those seats.

In closed list PR, parties supply a ranked list of candidates before the election. Voters choose only which party they want to vote for. As with open list PR, the proportion of seats a party wins closely matches its share of the total vote. But in this case, the parties choose which candidates fill those seats based on the order in which they appear on the party list. Sometimes the party list appears on the ballot so that voters know how the parties have ranked their candidates. However, as mentioned, in a closed list system, voters may only vote for a party, and not for individual candidates. In the current debate on electoral reform in Canada, no major party or advocacy group is suggesting that Canada adopt closed list PR.

**SINGLE TRANSFERABLE VOTE (STV)**

Single transferable vote is an uncommon form of PR, used nationally in first chambers only in Ireland and Malta (and in the Australian Senate). The British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform recommended STV in 2004, and it was supported by nearly 58 per cent of B.C. voters in a subsequent referendum (it needed 60 per cent to win).<sup>7</sup>

In an STV system, voters elect multiple candidates in each riding, just like in a list PR system. With STV, however, voters rank candidates. They may rank as many as they wish, and may choose not to rank one or more candidates. Individuals are elected once they meet a quota of support. That quota is typically determined using a formula (see figure 8) based on how many votes have been cast in that election and how many seats are up for grabs.

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FIGURE 8. DROOP QUOTA FORMULA

$$\left( \frac{\text{TOTAL VALID POLL}}{(\text{SEATS} + 1)} \right) + 1$$

Translation: Number of valid votes cast in the election divided by the total number of seats to be filled in the district plus one, plus one again.

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**“In the current debate on electoral reform in Canada, no major party or advocacy group is suggesting that Canada adopt closed list PR.”**

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Then comes the counting. STV counts usually occur in multiple rounds. First, any candidate who meets the quota is immediately elected. So, say the threshold is 10,000 votes. Any candidate who receives at least that many votes is elected. In the second round, the surplus votes<sup>8</sup> (that is, votes beyond the quota) received by winning candidates are distributed to the remaining candidates by looking at the voter’s second choice. If there are then surpluses, these are once again redistributed. If no one meets the quota, the candidate with the fewest votes is dropped from the ballot, and his or her votes are redistributed. This process continues in subsequent rounds until all seats in the district are filled.

### **MIXED-MEMBER PROPORTIONAL (MMP)**

A mixed-member proportional system includes elements of the current FPTP system and proportional representation—hence its “mixed” status. (It could also be designed to include an alternative vote or ranked ballot component instead of FPTP, but that’s a point for another discussion.) Though MMP is less common than pure PR, it’s used in seven countries, including Germany and New Zealand. The Ontario Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform recommended it in 2006–2007, though the subsequent referendum was unsuccessful.

With MMP, like other forms of PR, each riding or district elects multiple members of Parliament—but with a twist. Voters are given a ballot with two sections, or two ballots. One section or ballot asks the voter to choose a local representative, who will be elected using FPTP (or possibly a ranked ballot). The winning candidate is the individual who gets the most votes (or who gets a majority through the ranked ballot instant runoff system). The twist is that the other section or ballot asks the voter to choose a party (or possibly a candidate using open list PR). This section or ballot is used to establish how many seats a party will be allocated overall, and to elect what are known as district or list members. So, under MMP, voters elect two types of representatives: a local member and a regional or party list member.

Let’s run through how the allocation of seats under MMP works. First, parties are awarded any seats won through the local races under FPTP (or ranked ballot). If a party’s share of seats is *less than* its share of the popular vote as determined by the district or list vote, the party is awarded seats from the district or list section (i.e., the party vote), and is topped up until its overall share of seats matches its party vote.

In some cases, a party may win more local seats than its fair share as determined by the party vote. Sometimes, when this happens, other parties are awarded what are known as “overhang seats” until the share of seats that each party receives is close to its share of the party vote. In such cases, the size of the legislature will increase slightly, as is common in Germany.

FIGURE 9. MIXED MEMBER PROPORTIONAL BALLOT

**YOU HAVE TWO VOTES**

**PARTY VOTE**

This vote decides the share of seats each of the parties listed below will have in Parliament.

Vote for only one party

POOL PARTY	<input type="radio"/>
PIZZA PARTY	<input type="radio"/>
SLUMBER PARTY	<input type="radio"/>
DANCE PARTY	<input checked="" type="radio"/>

**RIDING VOTE**

This vote decides the candidate who will be elected.

Vote for only one candidate

NG, Marissa <small>POOL PARTY</small>	<input type="radio"/>
WILSON, Andrew <small>PIZZA PARTY</small>	<input type="radio"/>
LEBOWSKI, Jeffrey <small>SLUMBER PARTY</small>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
TERRIEN, Jeanne <small>DANCE PARTY</small>	<input type="radio"/>



## 4.0 PR: FAIR, EQUAL, AND ENGAGING

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Now that we've looked at the problems with our FPTP electoral system and have had a peek at the alternative proportional systems and a few of their virtues, it's time to further explore what makes PR systems fair, equal, and engaging.

No system is perfect—each involves trade-offs, and each will do better or worse at addressing a particular problem or set of problems. On balance, however, a proportional system that's fair, representative, and engaging is best for Canada's democracy in the 21st century.

### **A FAIR SYSTEM**

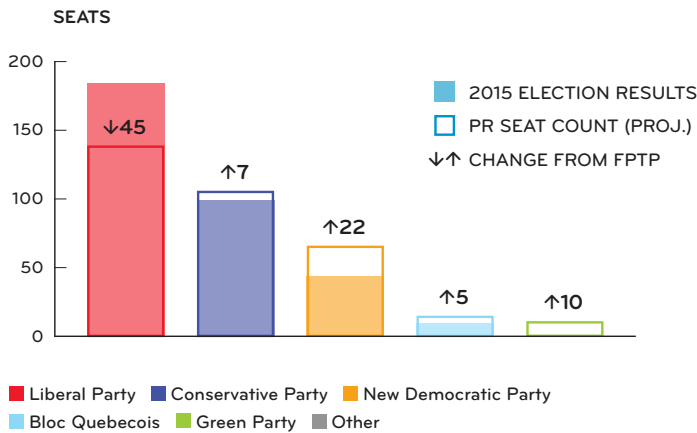
Under FPTP, millions of votes are wasted each election (cast for candidates who don't win, and for parties that receive fewer seats than their public support indicates they deserve). Many voters are left to decide whether to waste their vote or to vote "strategically" for a candidate they might not prefer, but who might win against another candidate they prefer even less. Under PR, very few votes are wasted, and the need for strategic voting is nearly eliminated. That's because under such a system, a party will receive a proportion of seats roughly equal to its share of popular vote support in a given district. (Keep in mind that districts can vary in size—some countries have several, and some have only one. Under PR in Canada, districts would probably be divided by province like they are now, but ridings would become larger.)

So, in a PR election, you get to choose the parties or candidates that best reflect your values, issue preferences, or faith in their ability to be a good representative. And each ballot cast goes towards electing a candidate.

Then, if Party A receives 39 per cent of votes, it receives about 39 per cent of the seats in the legislature. This means that both voters and parties receive fairer representation, and small parties have a chance to elect representatives, too. At the moment, millions of Canadians are stuck with a member of Parliament they didn't vote for. A PR system helps address this problem.

As an example of how a PR system might change the makeup of Parliament, let's consider how the 2015 election might have looked under PR.<sup>9</sup>

**FIGURE 10. OUTCOME FOR THE 2015 ELECTION IF IT WERE RUN UNDER PR (PROVINCIAL PR PROJECTION)**



When votes are translated into seats proportionally, parties and parliamentarians are also forced to work together, to co-operate in Parliament, and to consider the policy agendas and preferences of those whom these parties represent. So, not only does PR result in dramatically fewer wasted votes, less strategic voting, and a more equitable distribution of power, but it also incentivizes parties to consider a far more diverse range of interests. In other words, it forces politicians to pay better attention to more citizens, resulting in a much fairer approach to government than what our current FPTP system encourages.

**A REPRESENTATIVE SYSTEM**

With proportional representation systems, more women (and in some cases, more candidates from minority groups) are elected. Recent evidence also suggests that PR can help close the representation gap between rich and poor, since consensus systems (the sort of system brought about by PR) tend to be more egalitarian (Bernauer et al. 2015; Lijphart 2012).

Now, there is a difference between “descriptive representation” (electing someone who looks like you, shares your gender or ethnocultural

background, and so on) and “substantive representation” (electing someone who will support legislation that reflects your best interests as a member of a descriptive group). The focus in this section is on descriptive representation. The substantive representation area is complex to measure, since the quality of outcomes can vary by the sort of PR system chosen. But the takeaway here is that under PR, more women, and in some cases more candidates from minority groups, are elected.

Under PR, Parliament would look more like the country we live in. This would start with more balanced representation by gender. We don’t elect enough women to Parliament in Canada. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, [Canada ranks 49th in the world with 26 per cent women in Parliament](#). That puts us behind Kazakhstan, Iraq, South Sudan, Tunisia, and many, many others. Under PR, we can expect the representation of women to go up. In fact, PR systems tend to lead to at least 1.5 to eight per cent more women elected than FPTP systems, depending in part on whether or not quotas are used (Lijphart 2012; Salmond 2006). That might not seem like a lot, but a rise of five per cent for Canada would boost us from 49th in the world to around 35th—and would be a good start.

Visible minorities are also sometimes better represented in PR systems. On this measure, Canada has improved and done comparatively fairly well under FPTP.<sup>10</sup> In 2015, Canadians elected [a record number of visible minorities](#)<sup>11</sup> to Parliament: 46 MPs, or 14 per cent of Parliament. That’s still shy of the makeup of the population at large, however, which is 19 per cent. In the same election, Canadians also [elected a record number of indigenous MPs](#): 10 individuals who will comprise 3.8 per cent of seats in the House of Commons. Indigenous Canadians make up about 4.3 per cent of the country’s population.

However, white, affluent men are still overrepresented in the House of Commons. According to the study [Canada’s Governing Class: Who Rules the Country?](#), in 2014, there were “107 ‘extra’ white males in Parliament, 64 ‘missing’ white females and 45 ‘missing’ minorities” (Chan 2014, 1). We can and must do better—and PR could help us do just that.

The case of New Zealand helps illustrate the point of what could happen under PR. After its adoption of MMP in the 1990s, the percentage of indigenous (Maori) MPs in New Zealand rose from seven to 16 per cent, and its percentage of Pacific Island MPs went from one to three per cent.<sup>12</sup> New Zealanders also elected Asian MPs, going from zero to two per cent.

While this experience isn’t universal to PR—some PR countries, especially in Europe, don’t perform well when it comes to visible minority representation—there are specific issues surrounding political culture, history, and demographics that need to be taken into account. It’s also important to note that the improved numbers around minority representation in PR systems aren’t overwhelming, and that other factors might also be at work. Nonetheless, Canada’s diversity is often lauded as one of its greatest strengths. A

proportional electoral system, properly designed, could help make sure that Canada's diverse population is better reflected in the House of Commons.

## **AN ENGAGING SYSTEM**

In the 21st century, people expect their democracy to be open and inviting. They expect their representatives to be available, and they want them to reach out and provide opportunities for citizens to take part in the governing of their country. When this is not the case, they check out. We talk a lot about apathy, but the truth, as the 2015 [Millennial Dialogue Report](#) showed, is that alienation and disaffection are a more serious problem for Canada. It's not that people don't care—it's that people have given up on a system that excludes them, institutions they see as unresponsive, and politicians they think care little about their voices. PR systems help address some of the challenges that result from citizens feeling left out of their democracy.

For one thing, PR systems help generate better voter turnout. This is hugely important. Turnout has been in decline in Canada for decades. In 2008, it got so bad that only 58.8 per cent of eligible voters voted—the lowest in our history. In 2015, turnout was 68.5 per cent. Which we celebrated.

Under PR, Canadians could see voter turnout increase by five to seven per cent (Blais and Carty 1990; Pintor, Gratschew, and Sullivan 2002). Again, maybe that doesn't seem like a lot. But if we'd seen voter turnout go up in the 2015 election by five points, to 73.5 per cent, it would have been our best turnout since 1988, it would have beaten our post-Confederation average of 70.7 per cent, and 1.3 million more Canadians would have cast a ballot (1.8 million had there been a 7 point increase).

But voter turnout isn't the only measure of a healthy democracy. Citizen attitudes matter, too. In its [2015 report on the state of Canada's democracy](#), Samara, a research organization concerned with public engagement, gave the country a C grade, noting that "Canadians are not participating in politics as much as they could, they don't believe it affects them, and they don't see their leaders as influential or efficacious." Surely some of that dissatisfaction comes from the disproportionate allocation of seats by our current FPTP system, and the sorts of incentives it generates (for example, parties ignoring safe seats or campaigning primarily or exclusively to the narrow range of citizens that are likely to support them).

Proportional systems can also have a positive effect on political attitudes. Once again, New Zealand offers us a telling case study. Its introduction of PR initially increased system approval (Banducci and Karp 1999) and shifted public opinion favourably, though slightly, in support of the efficacy and responsiveness of the system (Banducci et al. 1999). That said, no single reform is going to be enough to cure all of our democratic ills. Reforms provide tools—such as a fair, representative, and engaging electoral system—that citizens can choose to take up and use to improve our country and our lives. The challenge is seizing the moment to use these tools.



## 5.0 BUSTING PR MYTHS

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One of the biggest supposed knocks against proportional systems by opponents is that they create chaos—through fringe parties that disrupt or fragment the legislature, endless elections, and unstable governing coalitions that make it hard for voters to keep politicians and parties accountable. While those concerns are legitimate, they’re overstated, and simply don’t reflect most PR experiences.

After all, think of Germany or New Zealand. Or Sweden or Denmark or Norway. Each of these countries uses a PR system, and they don’t exactly scream catastrophe. In fact, as pointed out earlier, most of the world’s top democracies use PR.

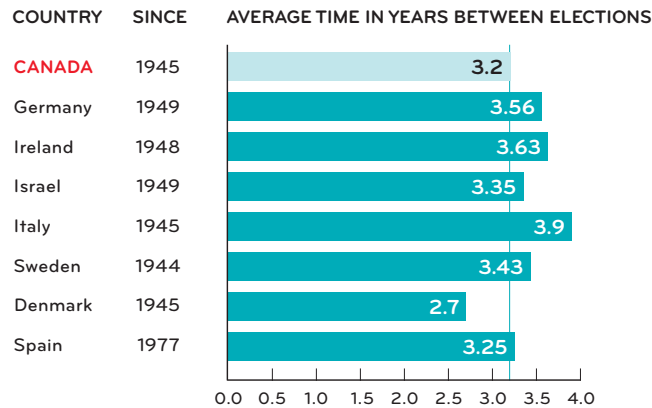
Fringe parties can be a real concern in a PR system, but usually only if the threshold required to gain a seat is low. In Germany, where the threshold to gain a seat is five per cent, there are currently only five parties in the national legislature. In New Zealand, there are seven. But keep in mind that in Canada, we currently have five parties in the House of Commons.<sup>13</sup> Under PR, there may be a new party or two that would win a few seats, but it’s unlikely that the number of parties with members in the Commons would become excessive.<sup>14</sup>

As for the concern about more frequent elections, Canada already has plenty of elections. In fact, we have had more federal elections than many



other democracies: 22 since 1945. That makes us even more “unstable” than Italy—a country that uses PR and is often used as the poster child for instability. Italy has only had 18 elections in the same time period. Most parliamentary democracies have periods of greater or lesser electoral stability and instability.<sup>15</sup>

**FIGURE 11. AVERAGE TIME IN YEARS BETWEEN ELECTIONS IN SELECT PR COUNTRIES AND CANADA**



It’s true that under a PR system, single party majority governments would probably be few and far between. Instead, parties would have to co-operate with one another to work in the best interest of Canadians. This would occur through minority and coalition governments—that is, parties that engage in public, formal power-sharing agreements in order to form a government. Globally, these arrangements are very common. Canada has experienced minority governments before—13 of them, in fact, including three between 2004 and 2011. It was a minority government that gave us our national health-care system, pension plan, and flag.

In a PR system with coalition governments, these arrangements would likely be more stable than the minority governments we get every so often under FPTP. They would probably lead to more public negotiation between parties, too, and would still result in many broadly familiar policies, since coalition governments under PR or mixed systems often move to represent (and please) the median (or so-called “average”) voter (Blais and Bodet 2006). Coalition and minority governments would offer many opportunities for productive co-ordination, as Max Cameron, professor of political science at the University of British Columbia and director of the Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions, argues in his white paper [Trust and Confidence: Post-Election Cooperation in Parliament](#).

Another potential problem, specific to MMP, is having “two classes” of MPs: local representatives and regional or list representatives. Some argue that local MPs are the “real” representatives, while the others

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**“Canada has had 22 elections since 1945. That makes us even more “unstable” than Italy—a country that uses PR and is often used as the poster child for instability.”**

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are supplementary. This is largely a perception problem that can be addressed fairly easily. For one thing, in an MMP-elected Parliament, individuals would have *more representatives* to engage with when dealing with issues they care about or particular problems. (Ask MPs how much time they or their offices spend helping individuals with immigration matters or passports.)

For another thing, regardless of whether members are elected through the local or list side of the ballot, it's their performance as representatives of the people that counts—whether they're receptive and accountable to the electorate, and whether they pass the sorts of policies and laws that citizens need and want.

Proportional systems can seem a bit confusing at first, but opponents of proportionality who use this as an argument against such systems don't think much of the intelligence of Canadians. PR systems remain the most common in the world. The rest of the world has learned to use the system, and Canadians would, too—probably quite quickly.

Some critics claim that PR makes accountability more difficult, since it's hard to “punish” a single candidate or party that you're dissatisfied with at election time. As with other systems, if as a voter in a PR system, you're dissatisfied with a given representative or party, you're free to choose any other alternative. But unlike in FPTP, your choice, no matter what it may be, is likely to count towards electing a representative.

It's also not hard to see how FPTP limits accountability in its own way. Under FPTP in Canada, individual MPs are beholden to their party.<sup>16</sup> And those in government rarely stray from the party line.

While proportional or mixed systems have drawbacks—which either tend to be less harmful than opponents suggest or are fixable by design—they have plenty of virtues. Most importantly, they do a good job at producing fair and representative results, and at engaging more citizens in the process of electing a government. And whatever the origins of our democracy, that's what Canadians want from it today.

## 6.0 WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

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At the time of Confederation, Canada was born into a world where FPTP made sense.

It was in use in Great Britain. It was even in use in the colonial legislature in Nova Scotia. And with a restricted franchise, expectations about representation were different. At the time, women, indigenous peoples, anyone under the age of 21, the poor, and even members of certain religious denominations were barred from voting.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, while regionalism existed in Canada at the time, it hadn't yet become the force it would in later years.<sup>18</sup> While there has always been a notable regional element to Canadian politics, the dynamic was less complicated in the 19th century than it is today. The same is true of gender and minority representation, since the expectations of the day, unfortunate as they were, didn't commonly include the belief held by many today that Parliament should look, think, and care about issues in broadly similar ways to the country at large.

Plenty has changed since Confederation. We now have 10 provinces and three territories. The country is vastly more diverse. We have penicillin and cars and the Internet. We have higher expectations about how our government ought to engage with and represent us.

And today, we also have the rare opportunity to adopt an electoral system better suited to the preferences, challenges, and standards of the 21st century. We ought to use that opportunity to choose an electoral system that is fair, representative, and engaging. Canadian democracy and those who live under it deserve nothing less.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Recall that in our parliamentary system, Canadians don't elect a government or a prime minister, but a legislature. The government is then formed by members of that legislature.
- 2 The term "false majority" has become part of the Canadian political lexicon. For a further exploration of the term, and some implications of such majorities, see Russell 2008.
- 3 As we will see later in this report, there are a variety of proportional electoral systems. For ease of language, when this paper refers to proportional systems, it includes systems that are semi-proportional or "mixed," such as mixed-member proportional representation.
- 4 Boosts in turnout from PR vary widely from country to country. For instance, rates in South America are fairly weak compared to some European rates. See Blais 2006; Blais and Aarts 2006.
- 5 The Economist Intelligence Unit defines "full democracies" as "Countries in which not only basic political freedoms and civil liberties are respected, but these will also tend to be underpinned by a political culture conducive to the flourishing of democracy. The functioning of government is satisfactory. Media are independent and diverse. There is an effective system of checks and balances. The judiciary is independent and judicial decisions are enforced. There are only limited problems in the functioning of democracies" (Economist Intelligence Unit 2015, 38). Other categories include "flawed democracies," "hybrid regimes," and "authoritarian regimes."
- 6 The number of elected members per riding is known as "district magnitude." In single-member districts, there is only one member per riding, which means the district magnitude is very low. In PR systems, the district magnitude can range from low to high. Carey and Hix (2011) find that a moderate district magnitude of around four to six members per riding allows for accountability, limits party fragmentation, and enhances representation compared to a FPTP system, without generating the challenges that can emerge in a high district magnitude PR system (i.e., one with eight or more members per riding).
- 7 The 60 per cent threshold was set by the government of British Columbia. In New Zealand's referendums on electoral reform, by contrast, thresholds were set at the standard 50 per cent.
- 8 There are a few ways that surplus votes can be transferred. One option is to choose ballots for distribution at random until they reach the number of surplus votes a candidate has received. A more sophisticated method is used in the Republic of Ireland, where they use a weighted sample of ballots. Another method is the fractional transfer, where *all* ballots are transferred, but are counted as a fraction of a vote.
- 9 Keep in mind that if the system changed, lots of other things would change, too. For instance, parties might offer different policies and target ridings differently, new parties might emerge and be competitive, and so on. So, this is an estimate.
- 10 In fact, FPTP may have a positive impact on ethnic representation in Canada (Triadafilopoulos 2012). However, that doesn't mean that representation levels will decline under PR in Canada; indeed, they could increase. Also, while Canada has done "comparatively well" in representing our diverse population, we haven't reached parity between the popular distribution of diverse groups and their representation in Parliament (see Chan 2014).
- 11 This paper uses the Statistics Canada definition and classification of "visible minority." See: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/eng/concepts/definitions/minority01a>.
- 12 New Zealand reserves a minimum number of seats for Maori representatives, known as Maori electorates. Under MMP, the number changes (there were seven in each of the 2008, 2011, and 2014 elections).
- 13 Technically, the House of Commons requires that a party have at least 12 seats in order to be recognized as a party for the purposes of parliamentary proceedings.
- 14 There are also other variables that may affect party system and legislature fragmentation, including political culture and the extent to which a country is divided on ethnic, linguistic, regional, or religious lines.
- 15 Since 1945, Canada has averaged an election every 3.39 years. In a similar period, Germany (which uses MMP) has averaged an election every 3.56 years, and Ireland (which uses STV) has averaged one every 3.63 years.

- 16 Certain PR systems can contribute to party discipline. In cases where there is a closed list, parties maintain control over which candidates are admitted to the list, which is not wholly dissimilar to the status quo in Canada under FPTP (since parties can already exercise control over which candidates are chosen to run in a given riding). The degree to which elected members are beholden to their party is affected by other considerations than the electoral system under which they're elected. For instance, the size of the legislature can matter (Franks 1987), as can whether the system is parliamentary or presidential (Cox 2005).
- 17 See Elections Canada's "A history of the vote in Canada," especially property/income requirements: <http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=res&dir=his&document=index&lang=e>.
- 18 There were regional tensions from the early days in Canada. For instance, not long after Confederation, the Anti-Confederation Party in Nova Scotia won a notable number of seats in the House of Commons. There were also tensions between Quebec and the rest of Canada. British Columbia had to be promised a railroad to join Canada. But none of this compares to the Quebec secession movement, or the regionally driven party system fragmentation of the 1990s and early 2000s. Moreover, inter-regional economic considerations, trade arrangements, and so forth are more complicated now than they were in the 19th century.