

# **Modernizing Canada's Electoral System: Instant Runoff Voting as the Best Alternative**

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## **Summary**

In the context of electoral reform brought about by the current government, many electoral systems come into contention for replacing the current first-past-the-post (FPTP) system. In this brief, it is argued that the instant-runoff voting (IRV) system is the best alternative for the current FPTP system in Canada. It solves most of Canadians' issues with the current system, while presenting itself as the least challenging option for all bodies implicated in a federal election. Additionally, the IRV system does not produce coalition governments like other systems, thus allowing the state to remain strong and effective. The adoption of mandatory voting should only be considered after researching methods that will incentivize citizens to vote. Finally, online voting should not be considered, due to potential security concerns.

## **Introduction**

The present FPTP system is an electoral system that has been, and still is widely used throughout the world. It "is one of the oldest and simplest electoral systems"<sup>1</sup> For instance, this voting system is presently used in all legislative elections in Canada, for national parliamentary elections in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, as well as for India and most Caribbean islands<sup>2</sup>. With the election of the current majoritarian Liberal government in the 2015 general election, one of the electoral promises made by the party and its leader, Justin Trudeau, was that the general election of 2015 would be the last federal election to be held with the FPTP system<sup>3</sup>. Thus, the question that must be answered is: Which electoral system is best suited for the Canadian electoral system, in replacing FPTP? While there are many alternatives to this system, this brief will outline why the instant-runoff voting (IRV) system, is the best voting system for Canada. In doing so, this brief will firstly go over the main complaints Canadians have about the FPTP system. It will then argue why the IRV system is the most appropriate alternative to the FPTP system for Canada. Finally, it will go over the notions of mandatory and online voting, as well as their suitability for Canada.

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<sup>1</sup> Blais, 2008, *To Keep or To Change First Past The Post? The Politics of Electoral Reform*, (p.1)

<sup>2</sup> Blais, 2008, *To Keep or To Change First Past The Post? The Politics of Electoral Reform*, (p.1)

<sup>3</sup> Liberal Party of Canada, Electoral Reform: <https://www.liberal.ca/realchange/electoral-reform/>

## ***The Main Issues Canadians have with the First-Past-The-Post System***

A number of articles have recently emerged in the media on the issues of Canada's voting system. One of the many problems raised lies in the fact that in certain Canadian ridings, the Member of Parliament is elected without an absolute majority of votes<sup>4</sup>. Another concern expressed by citizens when it comes to the first-past-the-post system lies in their belief that there is no point in voting, as they feel their ballot doesn't count<sup>5</sup>. A third concern expressed by Canadians is that the "proportion of seats each party wins does not usually match the proportion of the vote they garnered"<sup>6</sup>. A fourth and final concern raised by Canadians about the FPTP system is resorting to tactical voting, which is "casting a ballot not for the person you want to vote for, but for the candidate best positioned to defeat the candidate you most dislike"<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, the electoral system that will replace FPTP should provide solutions to most, if not all the issues raised by Canadians over the current electoral system to justify the process of electoral reform initiated by the current government.

## ***IRV as the Most Appropriate Alternative to the FPTP System***

While the government is keen on replacing its current electoral system, it has yet to come up with a replacement for it. Under this section, I will argue why the IRV system is the best alternative to the current FPTP system. This electoral system is the one used by Australia to elect the members of its House of Representatives, and has been used for over 90 years<sup>8</sup>. Historically, IRV has also been used in Canada at the provincial level, namely in Alberta, British Columbia and Manitoba. It is important to note that this system is also used within federal political parties, as the electoral system used to elect party leaders.

*"Under IRV, voters rank the candidates in accordance with their preferences. If no candidate receives a majority after the initial count of first-choice votes, the candidate with the fewest number of first-choice votes is eliminated; the ballots supporting the eliminated candidate are then redistributed according to the voters' ranked preferences indicated on the ballots. This process continues until a candidate receives a majority of the votes"*<sup>9</sup>.

Under this system, three of the main issues Canadians have with the first-past-the-post system are addressed. It solves the issue of having members of parliament elected without an absolute majority in their ridings. Secondly, it eliminates the problem of tactical voting (also known as strategic voting), since "ranked-choice voting reduces the incentives for strategic

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<sup>4</sup> CBC News, 2015, *The Pros and Cons of Canada's First-Past-The-Post Electoral System*

<sup>5</sup> The Globe and Mail, 2016, *Electoral Reform: It's Complicated*

<sup>6</sup> The Globe and Mail, 2016, *Electoral Reform: It's Complicated*

<sup>7</sup> CBC News, 2015, *The Pros and Cons of Canada's First-Past-The-Post Electoral System*

<sup>8</sup> Burnett and Kogan, (2015), p.42: *Ballot (and voter) "exhaustion" under Instant Runoff Voting: An examination of four ranked-choice elections*

<sup>9</sup> Burnett and Kogan, (2015), p.41: *Ballot (and voter) "exhaustion" under Instant Runoff Voting: An examination of four ranked-choice elections*

voting by making it more difficult for voters to determine which candidates are likely to be eliminated in early rounds of vote redistribution and which candidates stand to benefit from redistributed votes”<sup>10</sup>. Thirdly, the IRV electoral system eliminates the notion of an elector’s impression that their vote does not matter, as their second or third choices marked on their ballots may come into play in determining the winner of the election in a riding, thereby making the system fairer than the current one.

This electoral system can also be argued as the alternative presenting the least amount of challenges for all bodies implicated in a federal election. While Elections Canada would have to create new ballots, train their electoral officials on processing these new ballots and create a public education campaign for Canadians on the new system, implementing an IRV electoral system would require less changes than adopting any form of semi-proportional (semi-PR) or proportional representation systems (PR), such as the mixed member proportional representation (MMP) system, the single transferable vote system (STV), or even the party list PR system. Additionally, the IRV system would retain the current federal electoral riding structure, making it less challenging to implement. Both FPTP and IRV system are designed to elect a single candidate per constituency, whereas the party list PR and STV systems require multi-seat constituencies. Therefore, implementing any one of these systems instead of the IRV system would require the creation of new, larger ridings. Implementing systems that fall under the PR system umbrella would prove costly and challenging not only for the government, but also for federal political parties, as they would have to field more a greater amount of candidates than under the FPTP and IRV systems.

A big issue surrounding the implementation of a PR system is the prevalence of coalition governments in states who run such a system. In Canada, at the federal level, virtually no coalition government has ever been in power. There were however, attempts at coalition governments at the federal level. For example, one can recount the 2008-2009 parliamentary dispute during the 40<sup>th</sup> Canadian Parliament, in which the Liberals and NDP vowed to form a minority coalition government, with support of the Bloc Québécois on confidence votes. The coalition planned on defeating the Conservative minority government on a motion of non-confidence. Alas, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of December, 2008, the then Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, met with the Governor General, leading to the prorogation of parliament. Based on the above-mentioned facts, in the Canadian context, the enactment of a PR system would result in greater government instability, as a result of an increasing number of coalition governments or minority governments. In turn, this would result in an increased chance of having these governments defeated by motions of non-confidence, ultimately leading to a reduction in the time a government rules. Thus, implementing a PR electoral system would lead to undesirable consequences, namely creating a weak and indecisive state, as well as a reduction of government effectiveness.

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<sup>10</sup> Burnett and Kogan, (2015), p.47: *Ballot (and voter) "exhaustion" under Instant Runoff Voting: An examination of four ranked-choice elections*

**Reflections on mandatory & online voting, their prospective implementation, and implications**

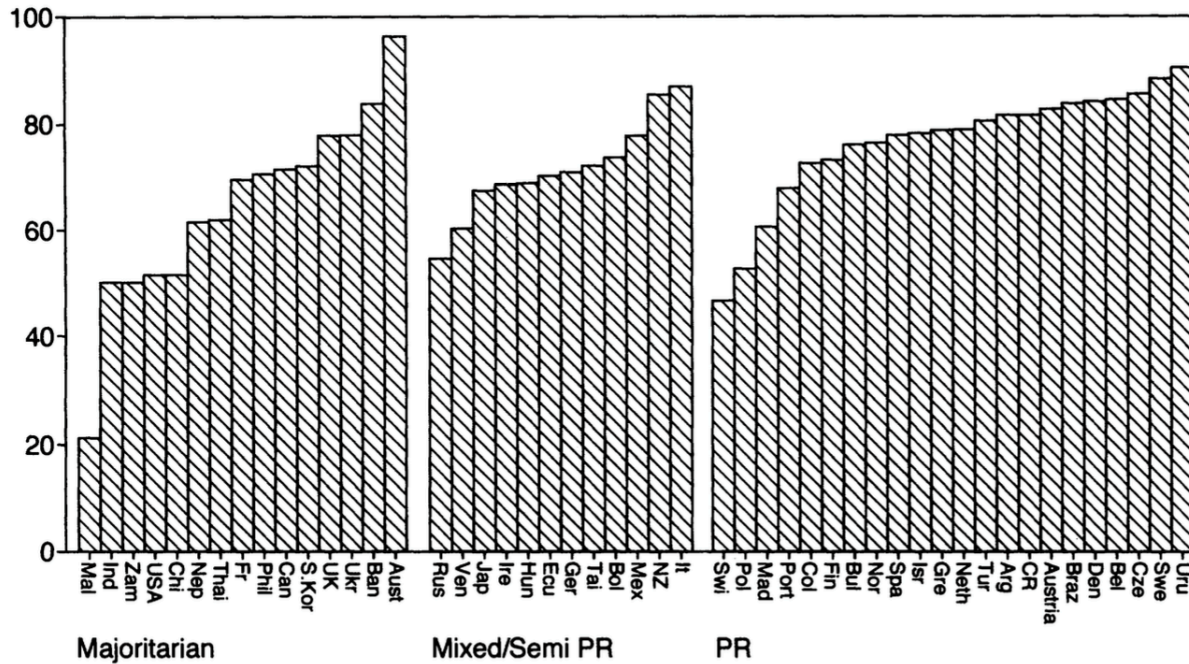


Figure 1: Electoral Systems by Turnout<sup>11</sup>

The policy of mandatory voting is one that is found in multiple democracies, such as Australia and Brazil. As attested by Figure 1, the impact of mandatory voting is substantial. Australia enjoys a voter turnout of around 95%, while Brazil posts a voter turnout of approximately 80% (Figure 1). By contrast, according to Figure 1, Canada has achieved a voter turnout of approximately 75% (these figures are accurate as of 1997, the year the article was published).

A theoretical costly voting model established by Stefan Krassa and Mattias K. Polborn examined “whether policies that increase voter turnout are socially beneficial”<sup>12</sup>. It addressed the following questions: “Does fining non-voters (or, equivalently, subsidizing voters) alter election outcomes, relative to voluntary voting? If election outcomes are affected, and if subsidized voting improves social decisions, do these benefits outweigh the increased voting costs that are a consequence of higher voter turnout?”<sup>13</sup>. The authors eventually concluded that “costly voting induces suboptimal equilibrium participation and frequently leads to wrong choices”<sup>14</sup>. With these findings, added on top of previous observation, the implementation of mandatory voting is a decision to be made at the discretion of the elected officials, and

<sup>11</sup> Pippa Norris, (1997), p.309: *Choosing Electoral Systems: Proportional, Majoritarian and Mixed Systems*

<sup>12</sup> Krassa & Polborn, (2009), p.276: *Is Mandatory Voting Better than Voluntary Voting?*

<sup>13</sup> Krassa & Polborn, (2009), p.276: *Is Mandatory Voting Better than Voluntary Voting?*

<sup>14</sup> Krassa & Polborn, (2009), p.284: *Is Mandatory Voting Better than Voluntary Voting?*

whether they deem it necessary or not. This decision will depend upon the government of the day's view on the matter, whether the government wants more participation by its citizens, but with wrong choices made by its electorate, or, whether the government is keen on letting its electorate voluntarily vote, with an increased chance of the electorate making an informed decision on their ballots. Another conclusion made by Krasa and Polborn is that "providing incentives for citizens to vote increases the quality of electoral decisions and social welfare"<sup>15</sup>. Researching and considering such incentivizing methods prior to making a decision on mandatory voting would be an idea worth considering.

Moreover, the concept of online voting is an appealing one in many respects. It would allow people who have limited mobility to vote from the comfort of their own home, without having to get to the polling station. However, there are extensive dangers associated with online voting. Chief of all, adopting a model of online voting opens up the voting process to security breaches. The vote may be tampered with, which can ultimately affect the outcome of an election. Aside from potential security threats, the cost of implementing such a system would be prohibitive. Overall, at this time, the implementation of an online voting remains an irresponsible and a non-viable system for the Canadian electoral system.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this brief asserts that the IRV electoral system presents itself as the prime contender to replace the FPTP system Canadians have used to elect their representatives. While there is no perfect electoral system, the replacement system should address the main flaws of the outgoing electoral system. In this case, the IRV system resolves the main flaws of the current FPTP system identified by Canadians. This system is known to Canada, and would prove to be beneficial for Canadian democracy.

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<sup>15</sup> Krasa & Polborn, (2009), p.285: *Is Mandatory Voting Better than Voluntary Voting?*

## **Recommendations**

1. Replace the current first-past-the-post electoral system (FPTP) for an instant-runoff voting (IRV) electoral system.
2. Prior to making a decision on whether or not to implement mandatory voting, researching and considering methods that seek to incentivize the electorate to head to the ballot box would be preferable.
3. Abstain from implementing online voting for federal elections.

## **Bibliography**

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