

# Electing a Representative Federal Parliament

For any **representative democracy** to function properly in the best interests of its citizens, the **representative assembly** those citizens elect must be properly representative of those who vote in the relevant elections. Canada is a representative democracy but, sadly, its various representative assemblies (Federal Parliament, Provincial Parliaments) have not been properly representative of those who voted in most of the federal and provincial elections.

The root of this problem lies in the current voting system used to elect the assemblies: the First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) voting system in single-member ridings. Over many years the results of elections in Canada, at federal and provincial level, have provided glaring examples of the distortions and instabilities that are the hallmarks of FPTP wherever it is used. At most elections FPTP manufactures false majorities, usually by giving an overall majority of the seats in the Parliament to a party that had only minority support among the voters. Sometimes FPTP gives this false majority to the 'wrong' party, i.e. not to the party that won the most votes, but to a party with even less support among the voters.

It is less obvious, but at every one of these elections about half of those who voted were left with no representation in the legislature. Sometimes it is more than half, sometimes less than half, but with FPTP it always around one-half. The assemblies were **not** properly representative of those who voted. None of this should be acceptable in a modern representative democracy. We do know how to do better.

If your aim is to elect a properly **representative** Legislature, you must use a system of Proportional Representation (PR). There are many systems of PR, but in reality you have only one very simple choice. Is your aim to secure proportional representation of registered political parties **or** is your aim to secure proportional representation of the voters? Do you wish to entrench the power of the political parties **or** do you wish to empower the voters? This is a very simple choice, but it has far-reaching consequences for the representation of the citizens of Canada and for politics in the Federal Legislature.

If you want only to secure PR of registered political parties, there is wide range of party PR voting systems available. Although they differ in detail, all these party PR voting systems have one common objective: to secure PR of political parties. Some of these systems offer the voter some choice among the candidates nominated by one party, but that choice is restricted. One serious consequence is that only by chance will most of these systems give proportional representation **within** the parties. It is common experience that the diversity of views within parties can be as important politically as the diversity of views among parties.

If you want to secure PR of the views of the voters and make the Federal Parliament properly representative of those who vote in federal elections, you have only one choice – to use the Single Transferable Vote system of

Proportional Representation (STV-PR), also known as “Choice Voting”. STV-PR is uniquely different from **all** other systems of PR: its objective is to secure PR of the views of the voters, i.e. to make the elected assembly properly representative. PR of the political parties will be the outcome of an STV election when that is what the voters want, but “party PR” alone is never the objective of STV. Unlike the party PR voting systems, STV is centred on the voters and the candidates. In contrast, party PR voting systems are centred on the registered parties. This difference determines the fundamental balance of power within the political system. Some political parties and some established politicians do not want to see STV-PR introduced, but that is because they do not want the balance of power shifted from the parties in favour of the voters. Those politicians do not want the representative assembly to be properly representative of the voters.

To secure proportional representation you must elect together several members from within the same riding (= constituency, = electoral district), i.e. you must use multi-member ridings. The numbers of members elected together (“district magnitude”) will determine the degree of proportionality obtained. This applies to all PR voting systems, but all too often commentators confuse the effects of district magnitude with the effects of different PR voting systems. With the same district magnitude, all PR systems will give similar results *in terms of the degree of PR obtained*.

The greater the number of members elected together, the greater will be the proportionality of the result. There is, however, an important trade-off between proportionality of representation and localness of representation. At one extreme, all MPs could be elected from province-wide constituencies. But that is neither desirable nor necessary. Completely acceptable proportionality can be obtained from much smaller ridings. For example, the 108 members of the Northern Ireland Assembly are elected by STV-PR from 18 constituencies, each of which returns six members. A very satisfactory degree of proportionality is obtained and each part of the Province elects its own local representatives who reflect the diversity of views within the local electorate.

Where the density of population varies quite markedly within a country or province, STV-PR can be implemented more flexibly to reflect local conditions and to respect the boundaries of existing “natural” communities. There is sometimes an obsession with equalising all the variables that can be varied when devising a multi-member scheme for STV-PR, including the numbers of elected members per riding and the numbers of electors per elected member. But there is more to equality of representation than equalising these numbers. In any case, variations in turn-out in the elections will make nonsense of the extreme effort often put into the quest for such equalness. In Northern Ireland turnouts in STV elections have varied by 25% between constituencies and there is a strong correlation between party support and turnout. It is thus pointless putting all the emphasis on equalness of numbers when devising the scheme of multi-member constituencies.

Whenever there is a proposal to change from FPTP with single-member ridings to a PR voting system with multi-member ridings, great play is made of the link

between the elected member and the electorate within the single-member riding. It is said that introducing multi-member ridings will break this vital link. Be aware that many who advance this argument are, in reality, just opponents of reform who fear they and their party will lose out if local voters are represented fairly. Surveys at all levels of government have repeatedly shown that the alleged link between the elected member and the electorate of a geographically defined single-member riding is much weaker than many elected members would wish us to believe. In contrast, the introduction of STV-PR would strengthen the link between the elected members and their local electorates.

This may seem a paradox: how could the change to multi-member ridings possibly strengthen the local link? But it is a fact, as politicians elected by STV-PR in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland will testify. It comes about because of the power that STV uniquely gives to the voters to choose their representatives. With STV-PR each elected member is elected because he or she obtained the support of a personal 'constituency' of voters. Those voters voted that member in and they can just as easily vote that member out at the next election *without having to vote against their preferred party*. That greatly increases the accountability of the elected members to their local electorates. By empowering the voters in this way, STV-PR creates stronger local links than exist within geographically defined single-member ridings.

Even though the alleged benefits of the 'single member link' are usually exaggerated for political ends, the creation of larger, multi-member ridings is an issue of real concern, especially in those rural areas where the population density is lowest. This is a particular issue in relation to Federal Parliament elections in Canada where the number of MPs per Province or Territory varies from 1 to 121. It should be quite easy to see how the larger Provinces could be divided into multi-member ridings of sizes appropriate to provide fair representation of the voters (proportionality) and ensure local representation while respecting the boundaries of recognised communities within each Province. At the other extreme, there is no need at all to amalgamate any of the Territories presently electing only one MP to the Federal Parliament. STV can be applied equally well in both situations. Of course, by electing only one MP from the riding it will not be possible to achieve "proportional representation" within that riding, but in such circumstances other aspects of proper representation of the local voters are more important and should be respected. The effect on the overall proportionality within the Federal Parliament will be small.

Although it is beyond the remit of the Special Committee, it should be noted that the recommendations and comments above apply equally to elections to the several Provincial Parliaments in Canada. STV-PR could be applied to all of these elections. STV-PR also has the unique feature among PR voting systems that it can be used in non-partisan elections, i.e. in elections where the candidates are not nominated by registered political parties but are independent or are nominated by local community groups. STV-PR would thus be ideal for city council and town council elections where these are non-partisan. There would be considerable merit in moving towards a voting system that could be used easily and effectively for public elections at all levels of governance.

The Special Committee's mandate set out five principles on which any proposal for electoral reform should be based. The adoption of STV-PR would score very highly in respect of all five principles.

1. STV-PR would enhance the effectiveness and legitimacy of federal elections because the democratic will of Canadians, as expressed by their votes, would be fairly translated into representation in the Federal Parliament. STV-PR would reduce distortion and strengthen the link between voter intention and the election of representatives. These dramatic changes should increase the public confidence of Canadians in both the electoral process and their political representation.

2. STV-PR would encourage voting and participation in the democratic process because the overwhelming majority of voters would then be represented in the Federal Parliament by an MP of their choice and would see that their votes would count. These changes would provide powerful incentives for more electors to vote. STV-PR promotes a collaborative approach both within and among political groups while respecting their diversity. STV-PR would certainly remove many of the present barriers to the inclusion of groups that are currently under-represented in the political process. A properly implemented STV-PR scheme would ensure the effective representation of all significant points of view within the electorate.

3. STV-PR is an accessible and inclusive voting system which is not at all complex from the voter's point of view. The voter simply marks the ballot paper "1", "2", "3", etc to indicate his or her personal choices among the candidates who have offered themselves for election to represent the voter's riding. The voter can mark as many or as few choices as she or he wishes. Practical experience of STV-PR in public elections has shown that it is accessible by eligible voters with recognised disabilities e.g. those who are partially sighted or blind.

4. STV-PR can be implemented to ensure reliable and verifiable results are obtained through an effective and objective process that would be secure and would preserve vote secrecy for individual Canadians. Practical experience of STV-PR in public elections has shown that all of these objectives can be achieved both when the votes are counted manually (as in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland) and when the votes are counted in a computerised system (as in Scotland). In all three of these implementations the original paper ballot papers, as marked by each voter, are available and retained for inspection and verification.

5. STV-PR would greatly enhance the accountability of Members of Parliament to their local communities because of the power that STV uniquely gives to the voters to choose their representatives. With STV-PR each elected member is elected because he or she obtained the support of a personal 'constituency' of voters. Candidates who show that they understand local conditions and are prepared to advance local needs at the national level will be elected and re-elected, if that is what the local voters want. With STV-PR most ridings would return Members of Parliament from more than one party: that would give local

voters access to a wider range of political representation within their own riding which is especially important when their concerns are of a partisan nature.

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