

Single Transferrable Vote: an Electoral Reform Proposal
Rebecca Stephen, Student at the University of Ottawa

The following is a summary of reasons why Single Transferrable Vote is the most ideal alternative electoral system for the ERRE committee to consider:

- The principle is simple – candidates are elected from multi-member constituencies, proportional to the number of votes cast in preference for the candidate
- The benefits include proportional representation, increased accountability of MP's to local constituents, increased engagement without burden of strategic voting and voting wastage, and increased legitimacy of the State
- Ballot counting in the STV system would greatly benefit from online voting, as an algorithm could make input and excess ballot transfer more transparent

With the entrance of the incumbent government following the 2015 Federal elections, the current Prime Minister stated that there was planned discussion regarding electoral reform. For decades now, discussion has pervaded electoral periods at the Federal, Provincial, and Municipal level, focused on a fairer representation of all citizens. With the ERRE Commission, Canadians are given the opportunity to share their opinion on what the most viable alternative voting system would be following the abolishment of the current First-Past-The-Post (hereinafter called FPTP) electoral system. Further, citizens wishing to take part in this discussion are charged with also assessing to what extent their preferred system might advance the following principles: effectiveness and legitimacy, engagement, accessibility and inclusiveness, integrity, and local representation.

Therefore, I propose the following as being the most viable alternative electoral system for the Federal state at this point in time. In my opinion, the proportional representation by a Single Transferrable Vote (hereinafter called STV) system would ensure that all principles outlined are addressed, and would significantly improve many conditions that challenge voters today.

While STV appears to be complicated, the mechanics behind it are relatively simple. As stated above, candidates are elected from multi-member districts, proportional to the amount of

electoral support expressed for each candidate by preference rank (Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform). For a candidate to be elected, the number of first place votes the candidate receives should exceed a quota, which is set at the outset based on the number of voters and the number of seats (Aleskerov & Karpov, 2012). The method of counting the ballots runs distinctly for each counting round; this is to say that the first round of votes for the most popular candidate is counted, and once his/her quota is reached, the remaining ballots are transferred to the next candidate who is listed as the voter's 'second choice'. This then ensures that all ballots are used, and all those who reach the quota are elected; therefore, no ballots are wasted. If, for example, a candidate is not transferred enough votes to reach the winning quota, the votes that they incurred are also transferred to the next ballot choice.

While this is a unique electoral system to institute in Canada, STV also has a major feature in common with majoritarian systems which are featured in Canada today via FPTP – each district is represented by its own candidates (Aleskerov & Karpov, 2012). Another important factor in this electoral system is the formula used in counting the number of votes required by any candidate to be elected. I propose the usage of the Droop quota as the ideal method, as it removes a largely undemocratic principle resultant of the FPTP system – that a minority percentage of the population can elect a party to hold the majority of House seats. The Droop quota follows the following formula:

$$v/(s + 1) + 1$$

Where v is the total number of valid ballots cast in the district, and s is the number of members to be elected (Lundell & Hill, 2007)). Finally, it is also necessary to consider how the current number of electoral ridings and the corresponding Members of Parliament may differ with the implementation of the STV electoral system. I propose that the current number of potential seats

for holding, 334, remain the same. However, it is following the purpose of the STV electoral system that each electoral riding is multi-member. Therefore, redrawing of the current electoral riding boundaries can allow for the implementation of the STV system, ensuring that each district become represented by multiple Members of Parliament.

In addition, we need to consider the potential for growth in the electoral system via online voting. Online voting could greatly increase the transparency and accountability of ballot counting, as well as the speed at which votes are counted and transferred to the subsequent candidates after each round. Further, it is important to consider the accessibility that online voting offers – citizens who are in remote geographical areas or in dispersedly populated regions would benefit from a more accessible online voting scheme.

While several countries, such as Scotland, Malta, and Australia, utilize the STV system in one level of government or another, I will be referencing the Irish system of voting at the Presidential, Dáil, Seanad, European and local elections (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2011). At all of the aforementioned levels of government, voting occurs by secret ballot for election of multi-seat constituencies (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2011). The procedure to count the ballots occurs in three stages: first is the opening of the ballot box, from which ballot papers in each box are counted and compared with the total number of ballot papers issued for that box. The second stage is called ‘first count’, during which all ballot papers are mixed and sorted according to first preferences, after which the quota is calculated. Any candidate whose first preferences equal or exceed the quota is elected, and the second count begins. Following the ‘first count’, the third stage begins. All surplus votes are redistributed and the candidate with the fewest votes is

therefore excluded, with his/her votes being redistributed (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2011).

An important characteristic of the apparent success of STV in Ireland is the steady increase of gender representation. As Figure 1 demonstrates, since the entrenchment of an STV electoral system, there has been a significant increase of women in the Irish Dáil. While increasing the representation of women in Federal politics has always been an ongoing challenge in the Canadian political system, the STV system encourages voters to vote for candidates, rather than parties – and parties which traditionally featured majority male candidates will now allow for more women to campaign on a freer ballot.

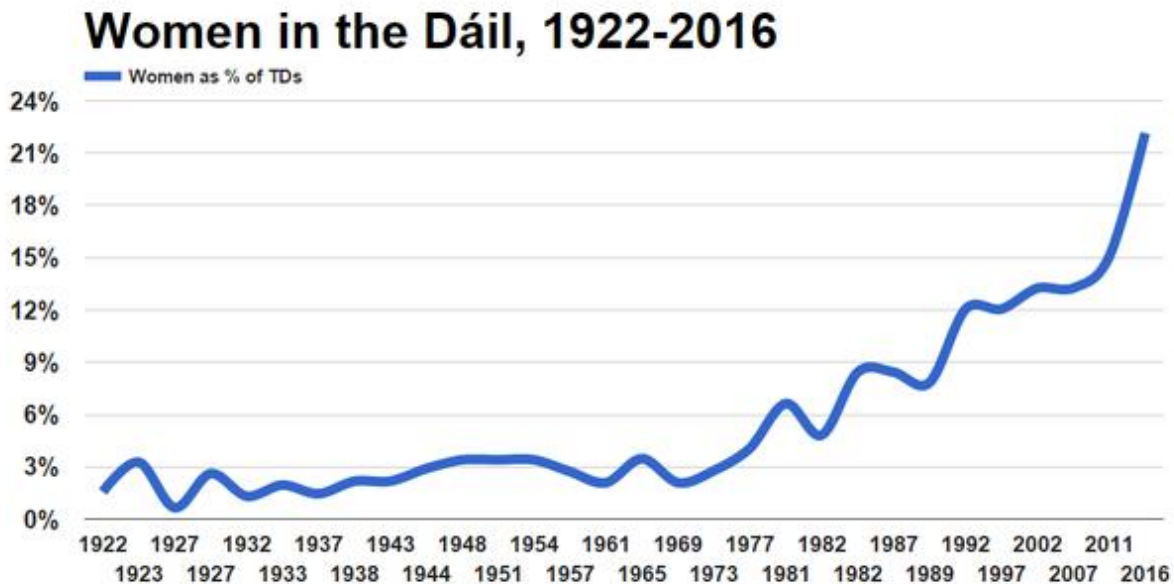


Figure 1. Percentage increase of women in Irish Dáil, 1922-2016.

The final purpose of this brief is to inform the ERRE Committee on the ability of the STV system to advance the following mandated principles: effectiveness and legitimacy, engagement, accessibility and inclusiveness, integrity, and local representation. I argue that the

STV electoral system has the ability to advance all of the outlined principles and will consequently improve the conditions of the electoral system we know today.

The ineffectiveness and illegitimacy that is resounding in the current FPTP system comes as a result of the nature of a majoritarian system. The plurality system creates a gap between the levels of voting support for different parties during an election and the proportion of seats allotted to them (Pilon, 2007). The FPTP creates a result in which a large portion of the population that does not vote for the elected party is left unrepresented in any ideological form. This removes the fundamental effectiveness of an electoral system, which I believe should be designed to represent interests of as many citizens as possible. Additionally, the sheer abundance of unrepresented Canadians creates what I view as a potentially illegitimate government – one that is not representative of Canada's diverse populations, cultures, and ideologies.

STV also serves to engage the voting population by encouraging voter turnout, ensuring that no ballots are wasted. This refers to the ballot counting method which uses a minimum number of ballots to reach the required quota, then uses the surplus ballots not utilized in the first count to elect the second highest candidate with quota. This counting method continues on to fill all vacant electoral seats.

The nature of the STV system would have a positive effect on the accessibility and inclusivity of our elections. By implementing a multi-seat system, it may increase the accessibility of the election campaigns. In a two-party system, the candidates generally campaign to potential voters with similar ideologies, but for those voters who do not have similar ideologies to the major parties, this makes the information of the election inaccessible. This lack of information sharing creates an inaccessible election which does not equally cater to all citizens. Additionally, with more seats open for election per riding, a more diverse spread of

candidates have the opportunity to be elected. This means that a minority voice, with less influence than a major party, could have the power to be elected so long as it reaches the minimum quota, and could therefore represent a more diverse set of citizens. This creates an inclusionary system in which minority issues can be brought to the forefront of Federal politics where they have been under-discussed for so long.

I would also argue that the STV system allows for a higher level of integrity in our elections. STV is voter-centred – elected members have more freedom from party discipline. The elected members gain this increased freedom because the party members are directly endorsed by the public – they have a moral responsibility to act on their constituents behalf (Pilon, 2007).

The final mandated principle that will be outlined is that of local representation. A crucial aspect of the STV electoral system is the direct link between a representative constituent and the Federal government. This element of local representation also stresses that STV allows for flexible geographic boundaries, which can also serve to increase the accessibility and inclusiveness of dispersed populations (Pilon, 2007).

Single Transferrable Vote as an electoral system serves to empower citizens and ensure just representation in the House of Commons. Not only does STV address all aspects of the mandated principles sought, it also goes above and beyond to create an accountable and legitimate government, as well as an engaged and inclusive population. This is an important time for electoral system reform in Canada. At the forefront of each election, we are constantly reminded of the lack of representation of minorities and third parties. This is not only a risk to the legitimacy of our country, but also the nature of fair and democratic representation in the Canadian political system.

Works Cited

- Aleskerov, F., & Karpov, A. (2012). A new single transferable vote method and its axiomatic justification. *Social Choice and Welfare*, 40(3), 771-786. doi:10.1007/s00355-011-0642-2
- Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform. (n.d.). Proportional representation by single transferable vote system. Retrieved October 02, 2016, from <http://esm.ubc.ca/BC05/PRSTV.pdf>
- Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. (2011). Guide to Ireland's PR-STV Electoral System. Retrieved September 29, 2016, from <http://www.housing.gov.ie/>
- Figure 1. Percentage increase of women in Irish Dáil, 1922-2016. Graph from www.thejournal.ie, Women in the 32nd Dáil Election, (<http://www.thejournal.ie/women-in-32nd-dail-election-2016-2630150-Mar2016/>, 2016)
- Lundell, J., & Hill, I. D. (2007). Notes on the Droop quota. *Voting Matters*, (24), 3-7. Retrieved October 2, 2016, from <http://www.votingmatters.org.uk/ISSUE24/ISSUE24.pdf>
- Pilon, D. (2007). *The politics of voting: Reforming Canada's electoral system*. Toronto: Emond Montgomery Publications.