

# IN SUPPORT OF PREFERENTIAL BALLOTS

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## INTRODUCTION

This document is a comparison of major voting systems within the context of the principles contained within the motion adopted in the House of Commons on Tuesday, June 7, 2016 (the Motion). While there are many types of potential voting systems with numerous variants, we will focus here on 3 basic options:

1. The existing First Past the Post (FPTP) system
2. Proportional Representation, in which the composition of the House is allocated between parties according to percentage share of the popular vote
3. Preferential Ballot, in which voters can express relative preference between candidates by ranking them in order, allowing for greater nuance in gauging voter intent

## SUMMARY

Of these 3 major classes of systems, the Preferential Ballot provides maximum benefit for the amount of disruption to our electoral system it entails. Preferential ballots address the main flaws with FPTP, which are its manipulability and its relatively poor capacity to gauge true voter intent. And crucially, changing the ballot to a Preferential Ballot is a relatively small change to our existing system, meaning that it maximizes compatibility with existing methods and avoids running afoul of constitutional requirements related to regional representation. The fact that it addresses the flaws of FPTP while remaining backwards-compatible with it make Preferential Ballots the preferred choice of voting system.

In terms of the 5 principles outlined in the Motion, the 3 classes of electoral systems can be summarized as follows:

Principle	First Past the Post (FPTP)	Proportional Representation (PR)	Preferential Ballot
Effectiveness and legitimacy	POOR FPTP often yields outcomes that are counter to voter intention	FAIR But PR is not compatible with existing ridings. Fixes such as MMP require additional MPs, increasing costs.	<b>GOOD</b> RB gives voters additional control. Decisive mandates to govern are granted. Avoids drastic changes to ridings or voting – backwards compatible.
Engagement	POOR Strategic voting is	FAIR Independent candidates	FAIR Parties are encouraged

	frustrating to voters and entrenches big players. Encourages wedge-politics	are excluded. All governments will be coalitions, requiring collaboration. But fringe parties have no incentive to broaden their appeal or compromise. They can play kingmaker.	to move to the center to broaden their appeal as a second choice. But majority mandates do not require collaboration.
Accessibility and Inclusiveness	<b>GOOD</b> A simple ballot	<b>GOOD</b> A simple ballot	<b>GOOD</b> While filling in numbers is more difficult than a simple X, the ballot could still be filled with a simple X. The system is backwards-compatible and is only as complicated as the voter wants it to be.
Integrity	<b>GOOD</b>	<b>GOOD</b>	<b>GOOD</b>
Local Representation	<b>GOOD</b>	<b>POOR</b> PR is party-centric. Larger ridings with multiple candidates will dilute representation.	<b>GOOD</b> RB is fully compatible with our existing riding-based system.

In addition to the 5 principles in the table above, the motion also directs the committee to consider constitutional parameters in making its recommendation. It is worth pointing out, therefore, that Proportional Representation (PR) and related systems (such as Mixed-Member Proportional Representation) require, to varying degrees, the dilution and/or replacement of our riding-based system. The number of parliamentary seats allocated to each province does not directly correspond to the population of each province, and the allocation of these seats cannot simply be replaced by a nationwide share of the popular vote.

Within the principle of “effectiveness” identified by Parliament, an effective electoral system is also one that delivers a mandate to govern. Systems that provide majority governments are therefore preferable to (more “effective” than) systems that provide a fractured House consisting of many smaller parties. A strong, stable government, provided that it has support of a majority of voters, is preferable to a weak and fractious coalition. Preferential Ballot provides this, while proportional representation does not.

Finally, a key benefit of the Preferential Ballot is that adopting it is not mandatory. A Preferential Ballot seamlessly extends the existing FPTP ballot (does not actually replace it). A preferential ballot filled out with only a single choice behaves exactly as a FPTP ballot behaves today, meaning that anyone who

prefers the old voting system can continue to use that system if they chose. This property will make it easier for the committee to “sell” the new electoral system to the electorate.

## **BACKGROUND ON DEMOCRACY**

Purpose of elections: to avoid civil discord and (in the extreme case) civil war. Within the context of a representative democracy (a republic) like Canada, a mandate to govern must, as closely as possible, reflect the will of the people.

## **DIRECT DEMOCRACY VS REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY**

Let’s first consider the literal extreme of respecting the will of the people. In an ideal democracy, the people make all executive decisions by referendum. It is an idealized model of democracy similar to the idealized laissez-faire model of capitalism that some hold on to, with largely the same flaws.

In practice, where such a system is used it often results in poor governance. The State of California, for example, requires a referendum on any bill that increases any taxes, which has created budget problems.

But voters are not stupid – it is simply a question of priorities. Understanding tax law to the point of being able to tell good changes from bad changes takes a significant amount of time and effort. And most people who are working full-time during the day and caring for a family in the evenings simply aren’t going to be able to spend that time even if they want to. In a similar way, we need regulation of food manufacturing because not everyone is able to accurately measure the concentration of melamine in milk.

I do not want the responsibility of deciding tax policy, infrastructure investments, or trade deals. And I would look with contempt on any leader who shirks their responsibility by putting the burden of those decisions on me and my fellow voters. Just as we have specialists who design our cars and splint our bones, so too do we have diplomats, politicians, economists, and lawyers who understand the challenges and pitfalls of national governance.

## **PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION**

While Proportional Representation appears to accurately reflect the will of the people in terms of the make-up of the representatives that govern us, it fails to achieve an actual decision on governance. The actual decision-making process is merely deferred, taking on the form of subsequent votes within parliament. While these voting representatives are better informed on the issues than the average citizen, they still aren’t going to be able to keep up with the depth and scope of changes that are tabled before the House.

An ideal voting system, therefore, does not merely kick the authority can down the road. An ideal voting system decides the authority to govern and provides, as often as possible, a mandate to make executive decisions.

An ideal voting system delivers, more often than not, majority government. And that, we can uncontroversially assert, is something that Proportional Representation will almost invariably fail to do.

## **INCOMPATIBILITY OF PROPORTIONAL SYSTEMS WITH ESTABLISHED RIDING PARADIGM**

Proportional representation systems are difficult to reconcile with existing riding-based representative democracy. In its simplest form, proportional representation would assign 5% of the seats to a party that received 5% in every riding, meaning that somewhere, there are ridings which will have a representative for which only 5% of the voters voted. The remedies for this problem (involving lists or amalgamated ridings) all deviate from or dilute the existing riding paradigm, leading to potential constitutional difficulties and worse representation.

Further, because some ridings (such as PEI) have an MP weighting far in excess of their population, the conversion of popular vote to allocated seats is far from uncontroversial, and could mire the effort in contentious political challenges.

Additionally, proportional representation is very party-centric. Independent candidates, if they are viable at all, will require special mechanisms to remain relevant.

## **FIRST PAST THE POST (FPTP)**

While FPTP establishes authority to govern and delivers majority governments, it has significant flaws when it comes to reflecting the will of the people.

## **VOTE SPLITTING AS A PRINCIPLE FLAW OF FPTP**

The classic example is the referendum used to name the town of Thunder Bay, in which the names “Lakehead” and “The Lakehead” resulted in a split vote and victory of the relatively less popular name “Thunder Bay”.

Another more recent example is the election of Rachel Notley’s NDP government in Alberta. While I don’t mean to undermine or disparage the achievement of Ms. Notley, I believe it is fair to say that she owes a portion of this success to the split within the Conservative Party of Alberta that saw much of its support move to Wild Rose. Clearly the majority of Albertan voters preferred a more conservative form of governance, but the FPTP system yielded a dramatic upset and an outcome that is likely a subversion of electoral will.

## **THE CONSEQUENCES OF VOTE SPLITTING**

Apart from the failure to reflect electoral will, the phenomenon of vote splitting has two other major negative outcomes: strategic voting and wedge politics.

## **STRATEGIC VOTING**

Strategic voting involves voters targeting their vote according to which candidates in their riding are most likely to play a role in the contest. This is to avoid their vote being “wasted” on a candidate with a more attractive platform but a lower chance of being elected. It requires voters to attempt to predict which candidates are most likely to be successful. This can be a difficult and frustrating process, and it tends to entrench incumbent candidates because they are automatically recognized as likely being in the final contest. The entrenching force is something that runs counter to voter intention and strategic voting is therefore something that corrupts or dilutes the will of the electorate.

## **WEDGE POLITICS**

In a 3-party race, it is advantageous to pick a platform that is distinct from the other 2 parties, even if (and actually in particular if) it is a minority view. The vote against this platform will be split between the other two parties and the minority view is therefore more likely to be elected. This tendency to elect minority platforms is detrimental to the will of the electorate.

## **PREFERENTIAL BALLOT**

A preferential ballot has none of these problems. Voters can indicate which candidates they prefer in order of preference. If their first-choice candidate is out of the running, the vote is not “wasted”.

## **BACKWARDS COMPATIBILITY OF PREFERENTIAL BALLOT**

A preferential ballot can accomplish the election of local riding representatives exactly in a same way that our FPTP ballot does today. The ballot is a simple drop-in replacement, with only its counting being different.

An additional aspect of backwards-compatibility is that a preferential ballot can be filled out exactly as a FPTP ballot is filled out today. In that case, the ballot would behave (with a single top choice) exactly as a FPTP ballot operates today. This means that anyone who prefers the FPTP system of voting can continue to vote with that same system. For this reason, a preferential ballot cannot be considered more difficult to use. This is a key advantage when it comes time to sell the new electoral system to the electorate.