

# Proposal for implementation of a Condorcet method in Canadian Federal Elections.

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*Submission to the Special Commission on Electoral Reform*

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## Concept

As an alternative to the first past the post (FPTP) voting system, I request the Special Committee on Electoral Reform consider implementing a voting system that meets the criteria for a “Condorcet method” at the riding level.

The philosophy behind the Condorcet approach is as follows:

*If there exists a candidate for a position who would defeat every other candidate in individual one-on-one elections, that candidate is the only legitimate winner of the election.*

This basic principle is so self-evident that it comes as a surprise that it is not already a core principle of any democracy. Unfortunately, logistical issues (see more on this below) made adoption of a Condorcet method difficult in the historical times in which our parliamentary democracy is rooted.

## Advantages

The FPTP system is well known to suffer from vote-splitting, where two candidates with similar positions that more closely fit the desires of the electorate divide the majority vote, leading to a third candidate - who might not be able to defeat either of the other candidates individually – being declared the winner.

Alternative systems such as instant runoff voting (where voters rank the candidates in order of preference, and the least popular candidates are sequentially eliminated and their votes redistributed until one reaches majority support) only partially address this problem, as the Condorcet winner risks early elimination.

In addition to the immediate problem – the wrong candidate wins the election – the potential for this outcome leads to several additional negative outcomes:

Firstly, voters feel the need to vote strategically. Someone whose preferred winner is candidate A might feel obligated to vote for candidate B in order to avoid a victory by candidate C.

In turn, this situation is very effectively exploited by established candidates and parties to exclude newcomers. With a vote for anyone other than a short list of establishment candidates easily portrayed as a “wasted” vote, it is almost impossible to break into the club of viable candidates.

With the field thus narrowed, an election becomes a much more negative process. It is no longer necessary for a candidate to show they are the best choice in a broad field, instead the incentive is to paint the short list of viable opponents as worse choices.

Election methods that choose the Condorcet winner resist these outcomes. Voters are free to vote their true preferences, without realistic concern that they are supporting the election of an undesired candidate. New candidates entering the race can be added to the top of a voter’s preference list if desired, without reducing the

effectiveness of the voter's choices among more established candidates; and with the resulting increase in competition, candidates must convince the voters of the benefits of electing them, rather than focusing on the negatives of their opponents.

As an additional benefit, where the wishes of the electorate and the wishes of a candidate's political party conflict, under a Condorcet method the voters are prioritized – a popular candidate can win an election even if (s)he loses the party's nomination, and the party cannot use the vote-splitting argument to blackmail the electorate into supporting their chosen replacement. The perception of individual Members of Parliament as puppets of the unelected "back-room" of their party - required to toe the party line or be kicked out of the club of electable candidates – leads to cynicism and voter disengagement.

## Implementation

Voting in such an election is very straightforward – each voter simply submits their ranked order of candidate preferences. From this data, the outcomes of all possible one-on-one elections can be calculated.

In historical times, the processing of this information was logistically challenging. As the number (N) of candidates increases, the number of comparisons escalates as  $N(N-1)/2$ . Prior to the advent of modern computing technology, elections with a large number of candidates and voters were not practical to calculate in this way. While running an election using a Condorcet method is now practical, the involvement of computers (in this or any other electoral process) necessitates certain safeguards against election fraud.

In particular, while the data must be processed by computers, it is essential that the voter's choices be permanently recorded on a paper ballot. The purpose of computing technology is to facilitate the manipulation of information, making a purely electronic record insufficiently trustworthy. For ease of data entry, an Optical Mark Recognition tabulation system (familiar to most voters from multiple choice examinations) would be desirable. Optionally, the voter could make their choices on a separate computer system, which would then print out an OMR-friendly ballot. The voter would confirm that this ballot accurately reflected their choices, and then submit it. After a Condorcet winner is determined, the problem of manually verifying the integrity of the process is straightforward – not all comparisons need to be made, it is sufficient to go through the ballots and confirm that the declared winner would indeed have won elections against each of the other candidates individually.

It is critical to note that the above concerns around the weaknesses of computer technology as used in elections are not specific to Condorcet voting methods. Regardless of the election method used, voter preferences must be recorded in a medium not subject to easy manipulation; and a large majority of voting must take place in a secured location, where representatives of different candidates can verify that it is free from interference and inappropriate incentives.

## Committee mandate

The application of a Condorcet method therefore meets the requirements set out for the Committee:

- **Effectiveness and legitimacy:** A Condorcet winner is by definition the preferred candidate of the majority of the electorate. Where any other method results in a different candidate winning the election, that winner's legitimacy is automatically in question. More complex methods such as proportional representation offer more opportunities for actions that either are, or are perceived by the electorate to be, illegitimate. For example the process by which a party chooses candidates to fill seats

allocated under proportional representation may be brought into question, raising concerns about the both the legitimacy of the final outcome, and the independence of the candidates.

- **Engagement:** By allowing new candidates to compete on a more level playing field, a broader range of candidates will be recruited, including those from traditionally under-represented groups. This increase in competition will also force candidates to compete on their merits, rather than on the flaws of a limited pool of opponents. This will lead to increased civility and voter engagement.
- **Accessibility and inclusiveness:** The concept of ranking all candidates in order of preference is straightforward, as is the idea that a candidate who can defeat all others individually is the only legitimate winner of an election. While internet voting would increase accessibility, for the reasons discussed above it is not compatible with a strong democracy regardless of the means chosen to select the winner.
- **Integrity:** By ensuring a non-electronic record of voter preferences, and enabling manual verification of the outcomes the integrity of the process is assured. By employing a conceptually straightforward process that is clearly aimed at determining the sincere will of the electorate, public confidence in the process is promoted as well.
- **Local representation:** Application of a Condorcet method at the riding level retains the strong local connections of the existing system, in a way that is not possible with many alternatives.

## Conclusion

Thank you for your attention. In closing, I will note for future consideration that the underlying concept here is suited not only for elections to Parliament at the riding level, but also in many other scenarios. For example, should the position of Governor General ever become subject to a general election - one can imagine that the current Presidential election in the United States would look very different under a Condorcet system. Finally, the concept is even applicable to referenda – where the electorate is traditionally required to choose between two options, neither of which may be palatable, in a contest that often descends to a question of which option can be portrayed more negatively.