

# Single Member-Proportional Vote

## (SM-PV)

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**Single Member-Proportional Vote** is meant to be a replacement for the current FPTP electoral system used for the Canadian House of Commons. This submission goes over the system's basic structure and function. It also looks at SM-PV's advantages over other electoral systems as well as Canadian public opinion about electoral reform in general.

## Introduction: Single Member-Proportional Vote

I started working on this proposal with a desire to reconcile those who support proportional representation with those who prefer First-past-the-post (FPTP). The result was a system I called **Single Member-Proportional Vote (SM-PV)**. In April Maryam Monsef, Minister of Democratic Institutions, outlined the several features that the new electoral system should have. SM-PV does a good job of meeting these standards.

### *What Stays the Same...*

SM-PV retains most of the structure of FPTP. Each voter still gets one vote to cast in the election. MPs are still elected in single-member constituencies. Governments are still formed on the basis of seat totals. In fact the number of electoral ridings and seats in Parliament need not be changed at all. This meets three of Minister Maryam Monsef's requirements: **1.** that the new electoral system not make the electoral system any more complex, **2.** that localized links between voters and MPs be maintained and **3.** that voting should be user-friendly and accessible. The fact that ridings and voting methods do not change with SM-PV also means that Elections Canada will not be burdened with operational changes which they estimate could take two years to complete under other proposed systems.

### *...and What Changes*

The differences for SM-PV start with how MP votes on legislation are counted once Parliament reconvenes. Currently each MP has one *equal vote* on bills before Parliament. Under SM-PV each MP has a vote that is stronger or weaker depending on how much of the popular vote their party received during the election. If a party wins more seats than the popular vote would normally entitle them their MPs will have weaker votes to compensate. If a party wins fewer seats than the popular vote would normally entitle

them their MPs will have stronger votes. Thus the ability of parties to pass legislation through Parliament will more closely mirror how much support each party received during the previous election. This means that under SM-PV Parliament would operate with a system of *weighted votes*.

### ***The 2015 Federal Election under FPTP***

The 2015 General Federal Election resulted in a Liberal majority government of 184 seats (54%) with 39.5% of the popular vote. The result is that the Liberal Party can pass legislation without having to consult with the other parties.

### ***The 2015 Federal Election under SM-PV***

Under SM-PV the parties' seat counts would remain the same but legislation would be passed based on share of the popular vote. As a result the Liberal MPs would collectively have roughly 39.5% of the votes in Parliament. The Conservatives would have roughly 31.9% of the votes in Parliament. The NDP would have roughly 19.7% of the votes in Parliament. The Bloc would have roughly 4.7% of the votes in Parliament. And finally the Green Party would have roughly 3.4% of the votes in Parliament. This indirectly meets Minister Maryam Monsef's requirement that the voting results of an election be fairly translated into election results without substantial distortion. While seat totals remain 'unbalanced' it no longer matters since parties will no longer have more power in Parliament than the electoral results say they deserve. SM-PV rejects modifying seat totals (an expensive exercise) as a means of fixing the distortions in our electoral system in favour of modifying votes in Parliament. As parties would have a voting power very similar to their share of the popular vote the 'distortion' is fixed without changing seat totals.

The formula for finding out each individual MPs vote is:

*(Popular vote for party X) / (# of MPs in party X) = Voting power of each MP in party X*

In essence for passing legislation you would treat the 2015 Parliament as if it were in a minority government situation but a majority government when it came to the government's ability to maintain the confidence of the House. I go into this in further detail in the the *Specific Situations Addressed* section at the end.

### ***Use of Weighted Voting in Other Contexts***

Currently no legislature uses weighted votes for its members. I speculate this is due to three factors:

1. Legislators don't like the idea that their votes might end up being of a different value.
2. States that abandon FPTP tend to adopt completely new systems rather than reforming FPTP.
3. States that retain FPTP rarely bring in changes that can weaken the governing party.

However, weighted voting is very common in the business world. Stockholders don't cast votes on an equal basis, they cast votes based on how many stocks they have. In a way parties under SM-PV would be like 'stockholders' of the popular vote.

## **Advantages over First-Past-The-Post**

### ***End of Wasted Votes***

SM-PV ends the problem of wasted votes because no matter what party is voted for it still alters the popular vote totals. And under SM-PV the popular vote matters. All those extra votes that a candidate didn't need to win? Great! They have still raised the popular vote totals of their preferred party and thus strengthened its ability to pass legislation in the new Parliament. All those votes for the candidates that didn't win? They still strengthen their parties' votes in Parliament (or weakened the government's ability to pass legislation depending on your point of view).

### ***End of Strategic Voting***

Because votes for your preferred candidate still have an effect on the ensuing Parliament strategic voting becomes unimportant. Under FPTP if a person wants to weaken Party X in their riding they would have to vote for whichever one of the other parties they thought likely to win. Under SM-PV it doesn't matter too much which they vote for since they both have the effect of lowering Party X's vote share. Thus they can vote for their *preferred* choice rather than their *strategic* choice. This advantage (as well as the previous one) will go a long way towards meeting Minister Maryam Monsef's requirement that the new electoral system restore confidence in Canadians ability to influence politics.

### ***Parliament Proportionality***

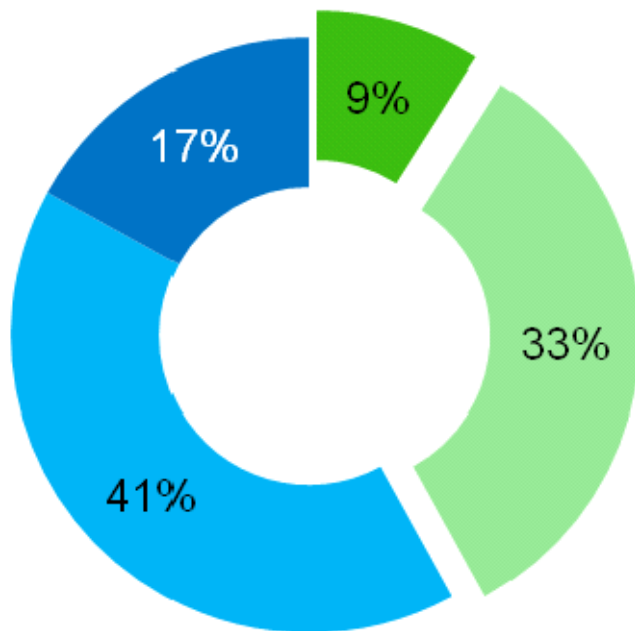
Under FPTP winning parties regularly receive ~30% of the votes, ~51% of the seats, and 100% of the power to pass legislation. SM-PV alters the last part of this formula by altering voting strength. For reasons that I will get into in the *Specific Situations Addressed* section I favour leaving the other two parts of the formula as they are. Under SM-PV the winning party is likely to win ~30% of the votes, ~51% of the seats, but have only ~30% of the power to pass legislation.

## **Canadian Views on Electoral Reform**

A recent poll commissioned by the Broadbent Institute has shed some light on what Canadians want in terms of electoral reform in its report '*Canadian Electoral Reform - Public Opinion on Possible Alternatives*'.

## ***Broadbent Institute Poll Examined***

Last year the Broadbent Institute published an examination of Canadians attitudes towards electoral reform. While I disagree with some of their conclusions the report is a useful resource. Let us look at what those polled said when asked what they thought about Canada's electoral system:

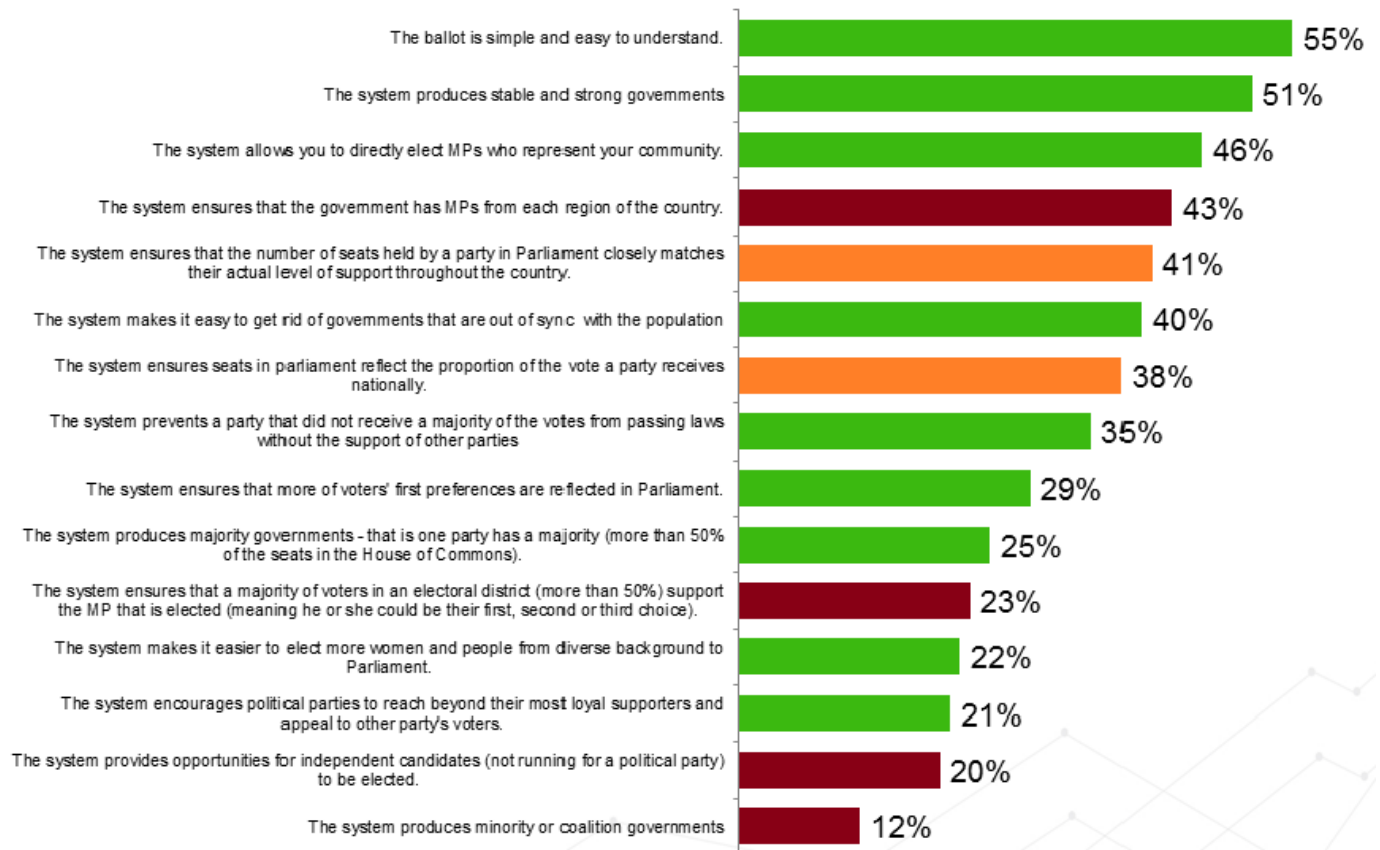


- The system needs to be changed completely.
- The system needs major changes.
- The system only needs minor changes.
- The system works well and does not need to be changed.

Source: Broadbent Institute

As the results demonstrate a majority want some form of electoral reform. This is the spin the Institute put on the results. However, it is equally true that the single largest grouping of opinion states that only minor changes are desired. I argue that SM-PV fits into this desire for minimal change to the electoral system. After all, the people will notice no changes in how elections are actually carried out.

Next the report asked what features of an electoral system were important to them. The results are below. Green bars are features SM-PV supports. Orange bars are features that SM-PV renders unimportant. Red bars are features SM-PV does not support.



Source: Broadbent Institute (with modifications)

As you can see in almost every important way SM-PV matches the type of system Canadians want. I will address the issue of regional representation in the *Expert Opinions* section.

For the two features above which SM-PV by-passes I'd like to offer a short explanation. Both deal with seat totals. Under FPTP seat totals are a measure of ability to form the government and pass legislation. Under SM-PV seat totals are still used for determining government formation but not the passage of legislation. I believe the ability to pass legislation is the primary concern expressed by those polled. Since SM-PV addresses this issue I have marked it as being by-passed.

Overall, the report published by the Broadbent Institute paints a contradictory picture. A majority of Canadians either want minor reforms to the electoral system or none at all. But when asked what system they wanted the preference was for proportional systems. ie. Major reform. In this situation SM-PV is uniquely suited to fill the requirements of a creditable alternative. It both keeps the current system largely intact but adds elements of proportionality that addresses the short-comings of FPTP.

## ***Expert Opinions***

I have been seeking input from many different individuals on the system I have created. What follows is the advice I have received. I have addressed the specific concerns each has raised.

**Prof. Andrew Heard**, Political Science Professor at Simon Fraser University

*"Many thanks for letting me know about your idea for modifying the electoral system. You have a great idea there, in many ways, and it made me pause and think about the possibilities. I do like the advantage of not having to change anything except the weight of each MP's vote. I guess the one possible weakness is that it wouldn't correct the tendency of the first-past-the-post to allow a party to dominate or blank out the other parties in a province or region. The Liberal victory in every seat in Atlantic Canada, in the recent election, is an example."*

Prof. Heard brings up a valid point about SM-PV: it doesn't correct the occasional tendency of FPTP to completely block a party out of entire regions. I argue that while FPTP leads parties to abandon regions they are uncompetitive in, SM-PV keeps parties courting these same regions.

Remember that under FPTP votes in ridings where your party doesn't win have no value. A party is thus inclined to target only those where they have a shot at winning. Under SM-PV ignoring a region because you can't win the seat itself is a bad idea as even these formally 'wasted' votes have value to your party.

So while the professor is correct that parties can still be blocked out of regions under SM-PV it will not lead to parties forsaking those regions. It should be noted that entire regional 'lockouts' are rare and don't tend to last more than a single election. As such the issue brought up should be a minor concern.

**Scott Reid**, Member of Parliament for Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston in 2001

*"If we try as a group to select a system in advance I can guarantee that the system will be reviewed and analyzed by each person and each party with one question foremost in mind: how will this help me or how will this hurt me? If any part of the tenuous coalition that we are today beginning to build decides that partisan or personal considerations outweigh the merits of the specific system being proposed, that in itself will likely prove sufficient to kill the proposal."*

Perhaps the greatest advantage of SM-PV is that no party is overly disadvantaged by it. The Conservatives and Liberals may be forced to consult with other parties on the passage of legislation more often but would be no less likely to form the government than they are now. The NDP and Greens gain a proportional share of power in Parliament (which generally means more influence) but don't gain the ability to 'hold governments hostage'.

And it benefits all of the parties in another very important way: ridings cannot be gerrymandered effectively. A party may try to cram all of their opponents supporters into one riding. But this does nothing to stop the popular vote from rendering their ill-gotten seat totals irrelevant.

**Prof. Tom Flanagan**, Political Science Professor at University of Calgary (*Retired*)

*"Interesting idea for achieving proportionality without changing the mechanics of voting. It has a certain logical appeal, but I'm not aware that anything like this has ever been tried.*

*There might well be constitutional problems, because MPs would no longer be equal in voting power. I'm sure someone would argue this is contrary to the preamble to the BNA Act (...a constitution similar in principle to that of the United Kingdom ...").*

*I think there would be some strategic consequences for electioneering. Parties would no longer aim simply at winning seats; they would also want to maximize their share of the popular vote, in order to get greater leverage in the House of Commons. This would mean working harder to get votes everywhere, even in "hopeless" ridings where outright victory seems impossible. Many observers would regard this as a beneficial development.*

*I'm sure there's much more to be said that I haven't thought of. It's almost impossible to think of all the consequences of an untried idea.*

*Anyway, good luck. I fear your idea is too far removed from current practice to attract much support, but it's worth discussing. Personally, I don't see any compelling reason to change our voting system. If Canada really is "the greatest country in the world," as our politicians love to say, *First Past the Post* can't be all that bad."*

It is worth noting that Prof. Flanagan came to a similar conclusion regarding electioneering that I did. On the larger issue of whether a constitutional amendment is needed I am inclined to say it doesn't matter. The changes I have proposed fall completely within the realm of federal responsibility. As such only the House of Commons, Senate, and Crown need approve of it and these are the same bodies that would approve an ordinary law anyways.

## **Specific Situations Addressed**

The basic idea behind SM-PV is very simple and can be used in multiple ways. While it is possible to switch all decisions to a popular vote basis, for various reasons this is not ideal. The proposal I have submitted assumes certain aspects of how the House of Commons runs will continue to be based on seat totals. I have outlined how certain situations *could* be handled under SM-PV.

## ***Legislative vs. Procedural Votes***

The primary aim of SM-PV is to lessen the ability of governments to unilaterally pass legislation with only a minority of voters behind them. As such I have taken a conservative approach to aspects of the House of Commons not directly related to passing legislation. I propose the two following guidelines:

- Votes on ordinary legislation will use the new MP voting system.
- Votes of a procedural nature or *explicit* confidence matters (budget, Speech from the Throne) will continue to be counted on the basis of seat totals.

## ***Who Forms the Government & Why under SM-PV***

Government formation would remain the prerogative of the Crown. The convention that the party with the most seats gets first shot at forming the government would likewise be preserved. In theory the convention could become that the party with the biggest share of the popular vote gets first shot at governing could be adopted. However, there is good reason not to adopt this new convention over the old one.

Governments should have a large number of potential cabinet ministers to choose from. Given the partisan nature of government formation this means keeping government formation based on the number of seats a party has. While the party with the largest share of the popular vote is also likely to have the greatest number of seats, this is not assured.

## ***Closing Thoughts***

There are those who will say that my system has the disadvantage of not having already been adopted by other countries. In reply I would like to ask a simple question: To what degree are the examples of other countries an accurate representation of what would happen in Canada? Countries have diverse histories, political cultures, and constitutional set-ups. Ranked Ballot may work in some countries. Proportional Representation may fix some issues where it has been adopted. But in either case those other countries do not have the unique circumstances Canada does. Single Member-Proportional Vote should be weighed on the basis of its potential benefits, not its lack of adoption by other countries.

In conclusion I will wish you all good health as you continue with the weighty task that has been given to you.

With Best Regards,  
James Wilson