

Backgrounder ✕

Comparing Electoral Systems



Canada's government system and election system are quite different from those of the United States (US).

✕ Canada

In Canada, the role of the Head of State is mostly ceremonial, non-political and distinct from the role of the head of government. Our Head of State is the hereditary monarch, represented by the Governor General.

Canada's head of government—the person who leads the federal government and runs the business of the country—is the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister is chosen through an electoral process but is not elected directly. Generally, the Prime Minister is the leader of the party that wins the most seats in the House of Commons in a general election.

There are currently 343 seats in the House of Commons. Each member of Parliament is elected to represent one electoral district (also known as a “riding” or “constituency”). A federal election takes place in each of the country's ridings and is overseen and coordinated by Elections Canada, an independent, non-partisan agency. Provincial, territorial and local elections take place separately and are organized by their own independent election agencies.

✕ United States

In the US, the Head of State and head of government are one person: the President. Americans vote separately for their President, senators and congressional representatives. During a US election, voters have to choose officials for more than 500,000 positions at the federal, state and local levels. There is no national election system. Each of the 50 states runs the election with its own rules and processes.

A unique feature of the US system for choosing a President is the Electoral College. In this system, the presidential candidate who gets the most votes across the country does not automatically win the election. Instead, when voters cast their vote for the President, they are actually voting for a group of officials who will represent their state at the Electoral College. It is these officials who vote for the presidential candidate. The candidate with the most votes in the Electoral College wins the presidency.

Helpful Vocabulary

Constitutional monarchy:

A system in which the powers of the monarch are limited by the written or unwritten constitution of the country.

Electoral College:

In the US, the Electoral College is the group of 538 appointed members who represent the states and vote directly for the President. The presidential candidate with the most votes in a state during the general election gets all of the Electoral College votes for that state, except for two states.

Electoral district:

Also known as a “riding” or “constituency,” an electoral district is a geographical region whose residents elect one representative to the federal government.

Federal republic:

A country that is a federation where leaders are elected.

Federation:

A political entity which is made up of partially self-governing regions (e.g. states or provinces) under a central federal government.

Head of government:

The person that leads the government and runs the business of the country.

Head of State:

The chief public representative of a country who is seen as the embodiment of the state.

House of Commons:

Lower legislative branch of the Government in Canada. Most laws passed by Parliament begin in the House of Commons.

House of Representatives:

Lower legislative branch of the US Government, responsible for making federal laws.

Monarchy:

A form of government headed by a monarch (e.g. a king or queen).

Presidential ticket:

In the US, presidential candidates choose a vice-presidential candidate as a partner to campaign with. During the election, they are one unit that can be voted for. This combination is referred to as the “presidential ticket.”

Representative democracy:

Type of government that is led by elected individuals who represent large groups of people.

Republic:

A country in which supreme power is held by an elected or nominated president rather than a monarch.

Senate:

Second, upper legislative branch of government in the US and Canada.