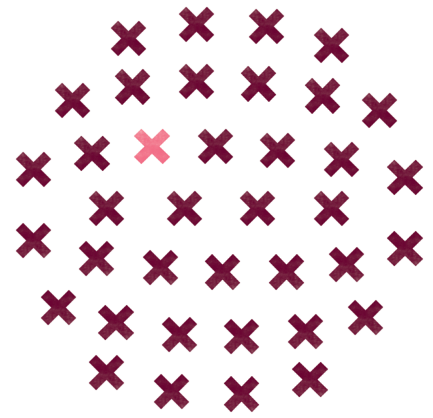


Voting Around the World series Electoral Systems



Throughout history, people have designed different ways to live together and choose their leaders. Leaders can be chosen in many ways; for example, they can inherit leadership, be appointed or be elected. Different electoral systems, or the way people elect their leaders, have an impact on the choices voters make, and the outcome of elections.

Electoral systems in Canada

Canada's federal electoral system is a plurality system, which means that the candidate with the most votes wins. There is an election in each federal electoral district, also called riding, and the candidate with the most votes becomes the member of Parliament for that district. This system is called "single-member plurality," or, more commonly, "first-past-the-post." You can think about it like a horse race where the first horse to cross the finish line wins the race, even if other horses came close. This system is used in Canada, the United Kingdom and India, and in many American states, as well as in certain First Nations in Canada.

How does first-past-the-post work?

In Canada's first-past-the-post system, voters mark their ballot to choose one candidate in their electoral district. The candidate who receives the most votes wins the seat and will represent their electoral district in the House of Commons.

For example, consider these results from an electoral district:

- Candidate A: 95 votes (38%)
- Candidate B: 90 votes (36%)
- Candidate C: 65 votes (26%)

In this scenario, candidate A wins the seat, although candidates B and C together received more than 60% of the votes. There is no requirement to have a certain percentage of the total votes, simply to have more votes than any other candidate.

The results of the election in each district determines the make-up of the House of Commons. Most candidates tend to belong to a political party, and the party with the most seats usually forms the government.

First-past-the-post is straightforward and easy to count. It's the second most common system in the world for national legislatures.

✖ How do other electoral systems work?

Other electoral systems include majority systems and proportional systems.

Majority systems

Majority systems can be like first-past-the-post in that one representative is elected per riding; however, the winning candidate needs to get more than 50% of the votes. Therefore, in our previous example, candidate A would not win with 38% of the vote, even if they are the candidate with the most votes.

Runoff voting

A common type of majority system is runoff voting. In this system, there are multiple rounds of voting. Voters first choose their preferred candidate, and if no candidate receives more than 50% of the vote, those with the least support are eliminated from the race. Then, there is another round of voting with fewer options, until one candidate wins with a majority of the vote. In our example, candidate C would be eliminated from the race, and voters would choose between candidates A and B.

Some runoff elections can go on for multiple rounds, eliminating one option at a time, holding an election each time. This is called an “**exhaustive ballot.**” It's what the International Olympic Committee and FIFA use to choose their host countries. Other runoff elections take place in two rounds. The first round establishes the top two candidates, and the second round is only between those two. **Two-round systems** are commonly used to elect heads of state, like in Austria, Costa Rica, Ghana and Peru, for example.

Some First Nations in Canada use aspects of runoff voting in their elections. For example, to elect their Chief and councillors, Selkirk First Nation in the Yukon uses first-past-the-post, but in the case of a tie, they have a runoff election between the two candidates tied for first place.

The time between rounds in runoff elections can vary. In **instant runoff elections**, rather than having multiple rounds of voting, voters rank candidates on their ballot in order of preference (1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc.). If no candidate wins a majority of first-choice votes, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and their votes are instantly redistributed based on those voters' next choices. This is also called "ranked ballot."

In Canada, many political parties use ranked ballots to elect their leader. They are also used in Australia, Ireland, Papua New Guinea and some US cities.

Proportional systems

The most common system for national legislatures is proportional representation. In these systems, the number of seats a party gets is proportionate to their share of the vote. For example, if a party wins 30% of the vote, they get about 30% of the seats in the legislature. Common forms of this system include party-list and mixed-member proportional representation.

Party-list proportional representation

In a party-list system, voters cast their vote for the party of their choice instead of for individual candidates. The parties create a list of candidates, and the proportion of the vote the party receives determines how many candidates on their list will get a seat in the legislature. Angola, Colombia, Spain and Turkey use this kind of system.

Mixed-member proportional representation

In this system, voters cast two votes: one vote for a local candidate in their district, and one for a political party. Just like in Canada's system, all members of Parliament who are elected in their district gain a seat in the legislature. Then, the second votes are counted, and each party adds more representatives from a list to reflect the proportional support they received. New Zealand and Scotland use this kind of system.

Mixed-member majoritarian representation

Some countries have a mixed system where most representatives are chosen through a plurality or majority system, and some are chosen through a proportional system. The number of majority seats and proportional seats are determined before the election. These are considered "semi-proportional." Thailand and Zimbabwe use this kind of system.

Many countries will use distinct systems for choosing different types of leaders. For example, a country might use a two-round runoff vote to elect their president, a plurality system like first-past-the-post for one chamber of their legislature and a proportional system like party lists for another chamber, like a senate.

✖ Will Canada change its voting system?

Elections Canada does not have a position on electoral reform; that is not our role as an election management body. It is up to parliamentarians to propose, debate and make changes to the *Canada Elections Act*.

As citizens, you have the right to contact your member of Parliament to share your views. You can also talk with your friends and family to find out what they think about our elections and democracy.

Democracies across the world are complex and ever-changing. This article is an introduction for students to Canada's electoral system in a global context. The information presented may not reflect all the nuances of a country's system of government, or its recent changes.