

**ELECTORAL  
REFORM**



## **BACKGROUND # 1**

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A closer look at electoral systems

April 2019

## CMIS

CMIS brings together people from labour, business and the community who believe our economic success and social well-being depend on adopting a proactive industrial strategy that:

- Recognizes governments have an essential coordinating and enabling role to play in the economy.
- Is a true partnership involving government, labour, business, community, academic institutions and other stakeholders.
- Reduces inequality by creating good jobs and putting people and nature at the heart of the economy.
- Goes beyond the sterile debate between “high tech” and “smokestack” industries and provides the tools different sectors need to be a vibrant part of a modern economy.
- Puts long-term needs ahead of short-term considerations.

Our activities include:

- Providing a forum for discussion of what should be part of a modern industrial strategy.
- Conducting research and analysis of public policy issues related to a modern industrial strategy.
- Providing access to research and information.
- Advocacy with government and in public forums for adoption of a modern industrial strategy.

CMIS is a partner organization of [the Canadian Labour Institute for Social and Economic Fairness](#) (CLI).

## CLI

The goal of CLI is to strengthen Canadian society and contribute to positive social change by providing progressive research, analysis and insights into the lives of everyday working Canadians, policy development based on what we find, and by initiating and planning campaigns in support of efforts to achieve social and economic fairness for all.

CLI works for:

- the expansion of labour rights for workers and unions
- maintenance of quality public services
- the development of a modern industrial strategy which is environmentally sustainable.
- 

CLI is a non-profit research institute for the purposes of:

- undertaking statistical and social research in labour rights, public services, and industrial strategies
- promoting progressive public policy and campaigning in its support
- holding conferences for the discussion and exchange of views thereon
- establishing research projects and any other complementary purposes that are consistent with these objects.

**Both CMIS and CLI  
gratefully acknowledge the support of  
[NUPGE Canada](#).**

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## ELECTORAL REFORM

### BACKGROUNDERS # 1: A CLOSER LOOK AT ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

***A closer look at electoral systems*** is #1 in a series of electoral reform backgrounders produced by [Canadians for a Modern Industrial Strategy](#) (CMIS). It was researched and written by Matthew Byrne, a PhD candidate at the University of British Columbia.

Other backgrounders in this series are:

[\*#2 - The role of referenda in electoral reform: best choice when done properly, otherwise the worst\*](#)

[\*#3 - Why political parties that form government in Canada are resistant to electoral reform\*](#)

[\*#4 - An overview of the 2018 electoral reform process in British Columbia\*](#)

The CMIS electoral reform backgrounder series also complements a comprehensive paper produced by CMIS entitled [Spoiled Ballots: Electoral Reform—The broken Trudeau promise and what to do about it.](#)

The paper and all four electoral reform backgrounders can be downloaded from the CMIS website.

WHENEVER THE PUBLIC is asked to choose among elec-

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toral systems, they face two large challenges. The first is that there are a number of major alternatives and each requires explanation. The second is that they are able to change the balance of power between political parties. Publicly available information is, therefore, subject to exaggeration and outright dishonesty. This document attempts to address both problems.

This backgrounder provides brief, clear descriptions of the big five electoral systems. The illustrations are meant to help visualize what the voter faces on election day and how the votes are counted under each system. For the sake of brevity, variations within each type and small nuances are not discussed. Further, technical language is avoided where possible for the same reason.

If desired, additional objective information is available from academic literature. Information on election reform from political parties is not recommended as it is, at best, slanted.

By relying on evidence, the backgrounder will help the reader navigate the exaggerations and outright lies often leveraged in favour of majoritarian systems and against proportional representation. The reason for the hyperbole and scare tactics is simple. The most dominant parties and their supporters benefit from the status quo, so exaggerations are necessary to avoid change even though proportional systems are considered better by most experts.

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**Table 1. Electoral systems: families and types**

<b>MAJORITARIAN SYSTEMS</b> winner-take-all	<b>PROPORTIONAL SYSTEMS</b> representation proportional to votes
First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) or Single Member Plurality very simple	Party List or Closed List diverse subcategory and implications
Alternative Vote or Ranked Ballot or Instant-Runoff Voting or Preferential Voting more choice	Single Transferable Vote (STV)  maximum choice and proportional
	Mixed-Member Proportional (MMP) simple and proportional
Supporting parties: Liberals (alternative vote, FPTP), Conservatives (FPTP)*, Bloc (FPTP)**	Supporting parties: New Democratic Party (MMP), Green (MMP, STV, or other proportional), Bloc (MMP)**

\*This preference is inferred from support for a referendum on electoral reform and self-interest (see Appendix B and the following section for explanation).

\*\*The Bloc has voted in favour of proportional representation in the past, but the motion was clearly going to be defeated. They now favour a referendum on electoral reform.

## Majoritarian

### First-past-the-post (FPTP)

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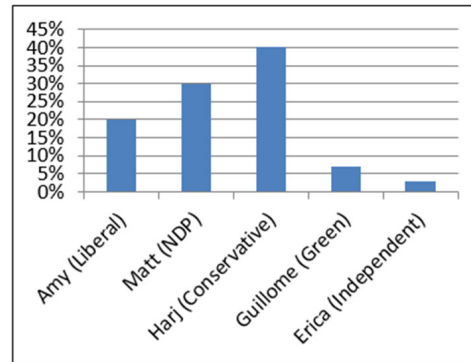
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## HYPOTHETICAL RIDING

## Ballot

Amy (Liberal)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Matt (NDP)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Harj (Conservative)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Guillome (Green)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Erica (Independent)	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Result



In a Canadian national FPTP election, the country is divided into constituencies (or ridings) which currently number 338. Each riding has its own separate election for an individual MP to represent it in Parliament. Each voter selects their preferred candidate, the votes are counted, and the candidate with the most votes (or a plurality) wins.

FPTP provides a simple electoral system. It tends to generate majority governments with no effective opposition. Those governments are, therefore, strong and stable. Accountability is also high because the public knows who to blame when one party has all the power. It also provides a constituency representative which is considered important by the public. It does, however, generate a considerable number of problems.

All votes in this hypothetical riding that were not needed for Harj's victory are considered wasted. These wasted votes include all votes cast for any other candidate and all of Harj's surplus votes (here, any vote beyond 30%+1). If all those voters stayed home and did not vote, Harj would have still won, and the Parliament would still have the exact same MP for that riding. In this hypothetical but realistic example, just under 70% of the votes were wasted.

Turning the focus to parties, the balance of these wasted votes across the country is what generates distortions favouring some parties at the expense



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of others. Imagine a party that receives around 7% of the vote across every riding. They would win no seats. This happened to the Green party in 2008. On the other hand, a party that wins many ridings as Harj did above would get more seats than their vote share. To illustrate, in British Columbia's 2001 provincial election, the Liberals won 77 of 79 seats with just under 58% of the vote.

The British Columbia example is quite rare, but in a typical Canadian election either the Liberals or Conservatives turn a favourably dispersed 40% of votes into over 50% of seats and thus gain a majority government.

It is through this mechanism that FPTP creates false majorities and therefore strong, stable and accountable governments. In our example above, the other parties who received 60% of the votes between them share fewer than 50% of the seats. They cannot effectively block or amend any government legislation nor can they hold the government to account between elections. As a result, the governing party can pass all its legislation (strong), decide on the timing of elections (stable) and requires no input or support from opposition parties (accountable). If the public knew this, would they consider these factors advantageous?

Regionalism is also worsened through FPTP as, other than the winning party, regional parties are favoured. The Bloc Québécois formed the official opposition in 1993 with 54 seats but received just over 300,000 votes less than the PCs who won only two seats. This enhances regionalism within the Canadian party system. Governing parties, such as the Liberals, might not even get a seat in Alberta and very few in Western Canada in general. The Conservatives have the same problem in Quebec. As a result, parties have little incentive to represent the regions where they have few MPs, and when only a few MPs in a party come from one region, they have a weak voice in caucus. This is why Trudeau's statement that Canada's diversity creates the need for a majoritarian system is wrong. On the contrary, proportional systems correct these problems by supporting diverse representation.

As the NDP, Bloc or Green party have never formed government, large portions of the electorate are never represented in government. They can only

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hope to be represented when their favoured parties gain negotiating power in minority governments.

This list of problems with FPTP is not comprehensive; it simply illustrates the more serious problems with the system.

### **Majoritarian**

#### **Alternative vote**

Hypothetical riding

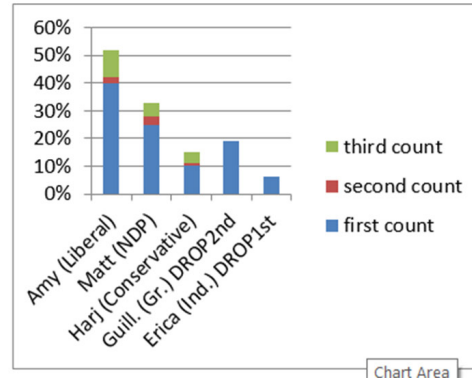
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Ballot

Amy (Liberal)	2
Matt (NDP)	4
Harj (Conservative)	3
Guillome (Green)	1
Erica (Independent)	5

Result



Alternative vote is like FPTP except voters rank order their preferences. The first-choice votes are counted like an FPTP election. If no candidate has over 50% of the vote, then the last place candidate is removed. The voters who supported that candidate then have their ballots’ second choices counted. Their second choices are added to the totals of the remaining candidates. This process continues until a candidate’s support exceeds 50% of the vote.

Alternative vote lowers the number of wasted votes. As seen in the example above, Amy would have won an FPTP election with 40% of the vote. Instead, by including the second and third votes, she received just over 50%, so fewer votes were wasted. Nonetheless, not all the votes are counted; in fact, that would only be possible if all voters cast their first ballot for one candidate. At best, more are counted, but far from all.

Alternative vote looks like a major upgrade from FPTP: ranking instead of one vote and majority instead of plurality. However, the problems with distortions and regionalism that exist with FPTP are not fixed, and these are serious problems for Canada.

**Proportional representation**

**Party list (closed list)**

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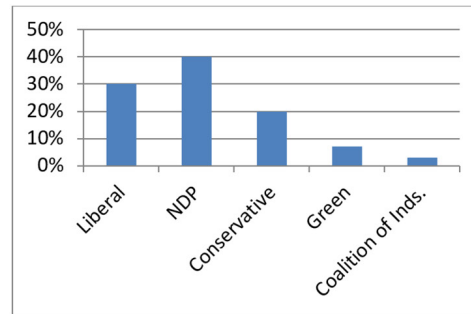
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**HYPOTHETICAL RIDING**

**Ballot**

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Lib</b>	<b>Cons</b>	<b>NDP</b>	<b>Green</b>	<b>Ind.</b>
Sarah	Noel	Carlos	Joy	Jake
Dave	Chris	George	Harash	Ann
Jane	Kate	Imoh	Joe	Fatima
Matt	Gwen	Moe	Mahesh	Sofia
Steve	Ibrah	Al	Jill	Camila

**Result**



The party list system represents a large change. The primary focus for the voter shifts from the candidate to the party. In its most extreme form, there is one constituency: Canada. Voters select a party rather than a candidate. The results are tallied and the parties are given a percentage of seats equal to their vote share. This extreme form is the source of most of the exaggerated criticisms leveraged against the proportional representation electoral in general.

The parties offer a closed list of candidates. Parties fill their allocated seats in the House of Commons according to that list. In the illustration above there are 5, but for a Canada-wide single constituency that list would be 338 long for each party. If the NDP received 40% of the votes, they would get 40% of the seats, and the first 40% of their candidates in their list fill those seats. There are no wasted votes or distortions at all. It is also easy to understand.

With 338 seats, a party needs to win about 0.3% of the vote nationwide to get a seat. As a result, there are generally many more small parties that will win seats and none that will win over 50%. This creates greater representation because so many parties will get a voice. But it also results in instability because governing coalitions need to include so many parties, and they risk falling apart. Accountability is also reduced because it is hard to know which party to reward or blame at election time. The system can also result in extreme parties gaining seats in the Parliament. A well-known solution is to create a threshold so that parties who receive less than that percent of the total vote get no seats. This is often enough to keep extreme parties out. For example Israel uses a 3.25% threshold.

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A larger concern for the public is that there are no direct MPs for a riding. As parties, not voters, choose MPs, it is the parties who become more empowered, not the voters. This tends to drive electoral reformers towards open list systems or STV, which will be described next.

Not all party list systems are so extreme. These lists can be subdivided so that each province gets its own list or that ridings are, let's say, five times larger than they are now but have five times more MPs. In such a case, Canada would have roughly 68 ridings with five MPs each. With ridings of this size, the increased instability and advantage to extreme parties all but disappear. For this reason, the argument that proportional representation encourages instability and extremism is an exaggeration to say the least.

## Proportional representation

### Single transferable vote (STV)

#### HYPOTHETICAL RIDING

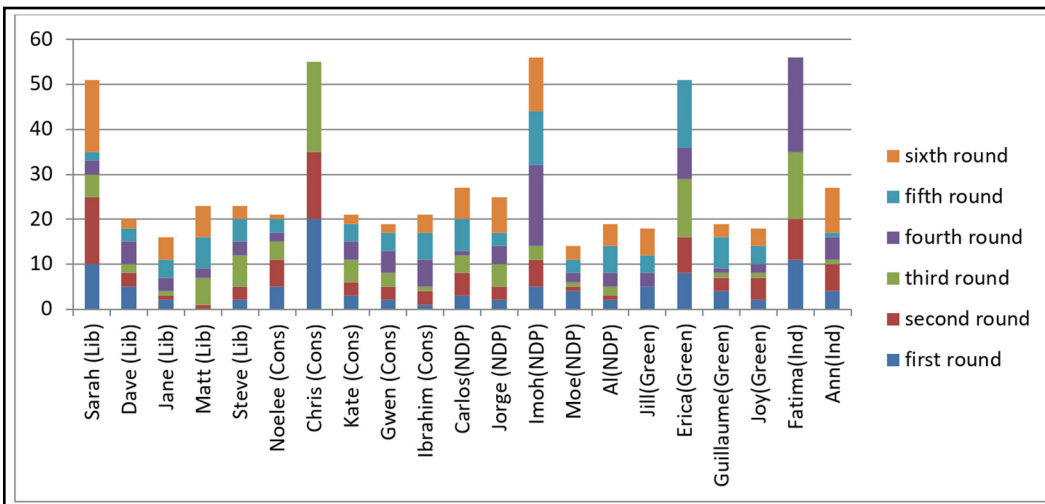
##### Ballot

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NDP	Liberal	Conserv.	Green	Independent
Sarah	2	Noelle 8	Carlos 17	Jill 14, Ann 20
Dave	4	Chris 19	Jorge 13	Erica 2, Fatima 3
Jane	7	Kate 6	Imoh 16	Guill 12
Matt	1	Gwen 11	Moe 10	Joy 15
Steve	5	Ibrihim 9	Al 18	

Results



The STV ballot uses a rank order just like in alternative vote. The counting is similar, except when a candidate passes the 50% threshold in the STV system, their surplus votes are transferred to other candidates. Counting procedures vary considerably, but all versions of STV share the same general characteristics. The defining feature is that the district magnitude (the number of candidates who win per riding) is increased; five is generally considered ideal (Carey and Hix 2011). To avoid a massive increase in MPs, the ridings are made five times larger by combining that many adjacent ridings into one. For a Canadian federal election there would be roughly 68 ridings each with five MPs instead of 338 with one each.

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## BACKGROUND # 1: A CLOSER LOOK AT ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

STV produces proportional results and, therefore, better representation. It tends to produce more parties in Parliament but not many more. As a result, coalitions are made up of few parties and become strong and stable governments. They are also fairly accountable because very few parties share the responsibility of governing.

It also gives voters more choice than any other system both when they cast their ballots and between elections. As illustrated above, two Liberal and one each of Conservative, NDP and Green candidates won, and all represent the same riding. Constituents have more than one MP to choose from when they have a concern to be addressed at the constituency level. For example, a Green supporter with a problem could go to their Green MP for assistance rather than an MP from a party they do not support.

The candidates are also empowered in relation to the party because they are better able to attract votes without the party label (See *Making Every Vote Count* 2014 for details).

Finally, regionalism is reduced because the critical mass of supporters for any party to get even one MP elected is significantly lower. The number of NDP and Liberal MPs from Alberta would increase if this system existed in Canada.

Given this list of major advantages, it is surprising that experts and electoral reformers have not chosen STV as their runaway favourite. It does come with limitations. The counting procedure is complicated and time consuming, and it is not clear to the public how the candidates won. It also requires much more information about the candidates to properly rank order them. Guessing and ordering votes from top to bottom are genuine concerns.

In Australia, where STV is used, voters have the option of bypassing candidates and simply voting for a party. Nearly 90% of voters choose to avoid the rank ordering required of the STV ballot (Above the line, 2016). Despite its ease of use for the most informed and motivated voters, STV appears to lack the simplicity that most voters desire.

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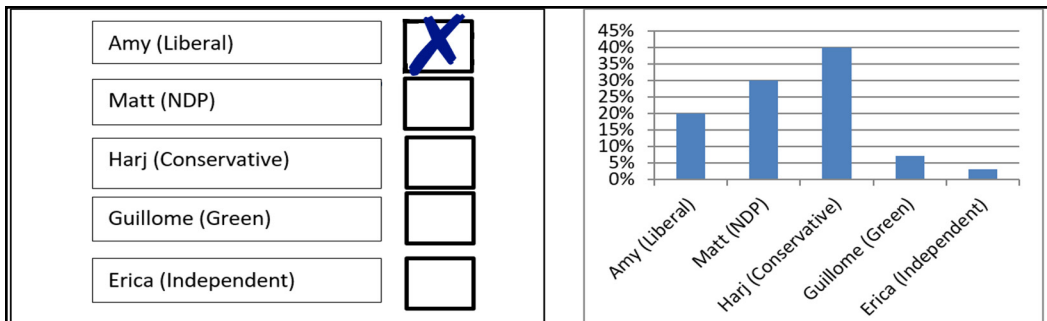
### Proportional representation

#### Mixed-member proportional (MMP)

#### HYPOTHETICAL RIDING:

##### Ballot

##### Result





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MMP is a combination of both FPTP and party list. The voter casts a ballot for a riding MP and a ballot for a party list.

The FPTP election occurs exactly as it does now. Then the party votes are counted. Parties are topped up with extra seats until they have a number proportional to their vote count. All of the advantages of FPTP and party list are combined.

It produces strong and stable governments. Like STV, MMP tends to create a small increase in the number of parties in Parliament. No party tends to win a majority so coalitions form, but they tend to include only two or three parties, so they are stable. The small number of parties in government also means there is good and visible accountability. Further, voters get their local constituency representation through the FPTP ballot, the methods for voting are fairly easy to understand and representation is enhanced through the list part of the ballot.

Furthermore, in New Zealand, political parties have used the list candidates to diversify their caucuses. Women, Maori and Pacific Islanders in particular saw an immediate increase in representation. The list MPs themselves, for major parties at least, attempted to represent geographically dispersed and traditionally under-represented constituencies such as minority groups (McLay & Vowles 2007).

Very few criticisms are leveraged against this system. The most common is that it creates two classes of MPs: riding and party list. In theory that is not ideal, in practice it is less of a concern. A second limitation is that unlike STV, it does not offer significantly more choice to the voter.

With so few limitations and so many strengths, it is not surprising that MMP is often considered the best electoral system and is often offered as the proposed proportional system in electoral reform campaigns.

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