



# Proportional representation: a more democratic way to do politics

September 11, 2018

## **Proportional representation: a more democratic way to do politics**

*The Report, September 2018*

If a party gets 40 per cent of the votes, it should receive 40 per cent of the seats. This is the central feature of a proportional representation (PR) electoral system. While there are different models of PR that achieve this, all variations of PR seek to create a more direct link between who voters vote for and who gets elected.

Over 90 countries in the world use a form of proportional representation, including Germany, Switzerland, Croatia, Chile, Italy, New Zealand, and Sweden. 80 per cent of OECD countries use one, making Canada a bit of an anomaly when it comes to our voting system.

This fall, a province-wide referendum will ask B.C. voters which electoral system the province should use for its elections: first-past-the-post (FPTP) or proportional representation.

In a second question, voters will be asked which one of three models of proportional representation they prefer should a PR system be adopted: Dual-Member Proportional, Mixed-Member Proportional, or Rural-Urban Proportional.

With each of these PR models, all British Columbians would still have a local MLA. The government has also set a five per cent threshold for parties, meaning that in order to obtain a seat in the legislature, a party would need to receive at least 5 per cent of the popular vote. This would ensure that parties with a voice at the table would be there by virtue of having a fair amount of support among voters in the province.

These considerations make all three proportional representation choices strong options for B.C. voters.

“They are all good systems,” says Tony Hodgson, president of Vote PR BC, the official pro-PR campaign of B.C.’s upcoming referendum. “They all preserve the number of MLAs in each region of the province. And they all allow voters to vote directly for the individual candidate.”

As mandated by a 2018 convention resolution, HSA actively supports changing B.C.’s FPTP election system to a PR system, and is encouraging members to engage in referendum campaigns supporting PR.

One member engaged in the campaign for electoral reform is Patricia Gartner, an acute care social worker [\[MS1\]](#) at Penticton Regional Hospital. Following an 18-year career practicing family law in Nelson, B.C., Gartner relocated to Peachland. The fall, she is volunteering with Fair Vote South Okanagan-Similkameen.

“I’m volunteering because I think there’s a number of positive aspects of PR that I want to make sure the voting public knows about, so that people are motivated to vote and so that people are making informed decisions,” she said.

“With the FPTP winner-take-all approach, each election you see how it ignores half or more of the voters in that particular campaign.”

She says the current system leads to the ruling party ignoring beneficial policy proposals from other parties. “Proportional representation would allow for a more collaborative approach to policy setting,” Gartner said.

“I think the NDP and the Greens in BC have shown how successful a coalition government can be.”

According to Hodgson, research suggests that proportional representation systems – whereby parties collaborate to create policy – actually produce better social outcomes.

“Canada was the top ranked OECD country on the UN Human Development index. And in the last 20 years, we’ve been overtaken by eight OECD countries that all use proportional voting,” he explained.

With PR, because everyone has a seat at the table, policies are more likely to address the concerns of a wider range of society, he said. “It becomes harder to make policies that disproportionately affect one group of people.”

“You get policies that prevent as much income inequality that otherwise might be generated. You get policies that address the health care needs of a broad section of the population.”

He said that PR leads to greater voter satisfaction, which in turn results in more satisfaction with democracy and a higher voter turnout. In a 55-year study conducted by world-renowned political scientist Arend Liphart, Liphart found that voter turnout was higher by 7.5 per cent in countries with proportional representation.

PR also leads to more diverse legislatures and a greater portion of women in government. The same study concludes that there were, on average, eight per cent more women represented in parliamentary bodies in countries with PR. When parties are able to put multiple candidates forward in a single riding, more balanced representation is likely.

One myth about proportional representation is that it leads to an increase in the number of elections. But according to a 53-year research study by York University Associate Professor Dennis Pilon, countries with a PR system do not have more frequent elections than countries with FPTP systems.

### **The downfalls of winner-take-all systems**

Unlike PR, BC’s first-past-the-post system is a winner-take-all approach. For those voters whose chosen candidate loses, their views aren’t likely to be represented in the legislature by the local representative, according to Hodgson.

“The MLA is not really accountable to those voters because they’ve already withheld their support and it’s had no effect. The MLA has still been elected and still gets power,” he said.

There are some other problems with a FPTP system. Elections are more vulnerable to boundary manipulations – also known as gerrymandering. And it encourages strategic voting, whereby a voter does not vote for their first-choice candidate.

The voters “have to decide whether they are going to vote for somebody they like less and maybe even dislike significantly in order to prevent the worst outcome for them,” explained Hodgson. “So there is actually a lot of dishonest voting.”

This can give a lot of decision-making authority to polls – and we all know polls can be wrong.

But perhaps the most glaring flaw in the FPTP system is that it delivers skewed election results. It is commonplace for a party to win the majority of the power with a minority of voter support. In Ontario’s 2018 election, Progressive Conservative candidate Doug Ford received 40.5 per cent of the vote and 61 per cent of the seats at Queen’s Park.

But we don’t have to look as far as Ontario to see such stark discrepancies. In the 2001 B.C. provincial election, the B.C. Liberals won 57.6 per cent of the vote, but took 97 per cent of the seats – all but two. The Greens, with 12.4 per cent of the popular vote, were shut out of the legislature completely.

In more severe circumstances, FPTP delivers “wrong winner” elections – when the party winning the popular vote doesn’t become the ruling party. This happened in B.C.’s 1996 election, and it happened in the 2016 U.S. election, resulting in a “wrong winner” victory for Donald Trump.

Proportional representation can help address some of the problems that arise in FPTP elections.

When the facts are laid out, it's easy to get excited about the upcoming referendum and the possibility it holds for a fairer way of doing politics. HSA will be working with members on a pledge to vote drive, among other educational initiatives. If you are interested in joining HSA's referendum efforts, please contact Sam at [sponting@hsabc.org](mailto:sponting@hsabc.org).

THREE THINGS YOU CAN DO TO PROMOTE PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION:

1. Sign an HSA pledge to vote card, and encourage five other HSA members in your workplace to sign.
2. Register for a PR webinar. Visit [www.hsabc.org](http://www.hsabc.org) for information on webinar opportunities.
3. Help educate! Share HSA's social media posts. Take a selfie with your pledge card.

Type:

[The Report](#)

Topic:

[Issues, Campaigns and Government Relations](#)

- [Print](#)
- [PDF](#)

180 East Columbia  
New Westminster, BC V3L 0G7

Website  
[www.hsabc.org](http://www.hsabc.org)

Telephone 604-517-0994  
1-800-663-2017