



Electoral reform in Ontario

Wednesday, OCTOBER 10 is Provincial Election and Referendum Day

Based on the recommendation of the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, Ontario voters have the chance to vote for a proportional representation model of voting. CPJ has supported proportional representation for many years. This brochure is meant to help our Ontario supporters understand and vote for the proposal before them.

What is electoral reform?

The electoral system is the process by which we elect our Members of Parliament and members of our provincial legislatures. We currently use a system called 'First Past the Post' (FPTP) in all current provincial and federal elections in Canada. In essence, FPTP means that the country or province is divided into geographic ridings, each of which sends one representative to the legislature. The person who wins the most votes in each riding is elected to the legislature.

While the current system has often offered a great deal of stability, calls for reform have existed since Confederation, and have grown stronger over the years. Over the last few years five provinces, including Ontario, have seriously considered electoral reform. In response to calls for greater fairness and better representation, electoral commissions were struck in Quebec, P.E.I. and New Brunswick. B.C. brought together citizens from its provincial ridings to explore this issue, a process also adopted in Ontario. All of these commissions and assemblies have called for electoral reform, and while reform has yet to be implemented, citizens from across the country have increasingly continued to press for electoral change.

What are the weaknesses of the current electoral system?

While the First Past the Post system often produces majority governments, it does so by inflating the number of seats won by larger parties, and minimizing the seats won by smaller parties. While support for smaller parties is often widespread across the province, they often do not have sufficient levels of concentrated support to come first in each individual riding. Thus, despite the fact that they may have 10% - or more - support in the province, they do not win any seats, and consequently are not properly represented in the legislature. Likewise, one of the major parties is generally able to secure a majority of seats with less than 50% of the popular vote, and thus forms the government.

As a result, many voters are in a bind: either they can 'waste' their votes by voting for a candidate with no chance of winning in their riding, or they can vote 'strategically' for a candidate who is not their first choice in the hopes of preventing another candidate from winning.

Why is this a public justice issue?

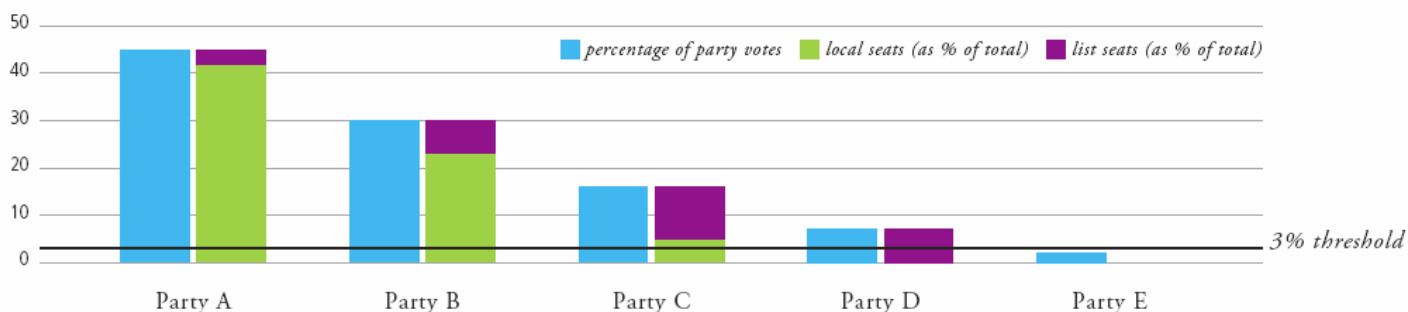
CPJ's interest in electoral reform grows out of our strong belief in justly

accommodating diversity and respecting the reality of pluralism. We believe that the wide range of opinions and values Canadians hold need to find expression in the institutions of our society, especially within our political institutions. Our legislatures need to reflect the true diversity of opinion found in the country. A more proportional electoral system helps ensure this will happen by encouraging parties to take principled and distinct stands on various issues, and by allowing voters to more sincerely express their values at election time, without fear that their votes will be 'wasted' because they don't go to a winning candidate.

What is the Ontario Citizens' Assembly?

The Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform was established by the Ontario government in 2006 to help guide the process of electoral reform. They examined the current electoral system and prospects for change. The Assembly was composed of one citizen from each provincial riding, randomly selected with consideration demographic representation. Consultations took place across the province, and they received comments and recommendations from thousands of individuals and groups - including CPJ.

Compensation for lack of Proportionality



What is being proposed?

The Citizens' Assembly decided that Ontario needs electoral reform, while appreciating many elements of the current FPTP system. As a result, they chose Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) as their recommendation. MMP combines the element of geographic ridings from the current system with an added element of proportionality – that is, a reform to the electoral system that ensures the legislature will more accurately reflect the percentages of votes that each of the parties receive in an election. Proportionality means that if Party A wins 10% of the votes in Ontario, it should receive about 10% of the seats at Queen's Park.

What is Mixed Member Proportional?

MMP combines two key elements – ridings and proportionality. Similar to our current elections, in an MMP system each voter would vote for a candidate who is running to represent their geographic riding – and the candidate with the most votes in the riding would become their Member of Provincial Parliament. In addition, each voter would also get a second vote on the ballot – this time, not for a single representative but for a political party. This second party vote is counted up across the province in order to determine what percentage of seats each party should get.

The two types of votes are then combined: if Party B is entitled to 30% of the seats (because it received 30% of the party votes), first all the candidates from Party B that won seats in the local ridings are counted. If the party did not win enough of these local seats to reach 30% of the legislature seats, they will be allocated 'top up' seats.

The individuals who will sit in the legislature to fill these 'top up' seats

(also known as 'list seats') are selected from a list that each political party submits before the election. That way, voters know ahead of time who the actual members will be for any of these seats, and can vote accordingly. As you can see from the diagram above, this will have the greatest impact on smaller parties who, until now, have been unable to elect the proper proportion of local members. Under the MMP model, they would receive proportionate representation. There is also a threshold for being allocated the top-up seats; parties need to win at least 3% of the party vote to get any seats.

What are some of the benefits of Mixed Member Proportional?

MMP is a more proportional system than the current one, so the votes of Ontarians will be more accurately reflected in the make-up of the legislature. This means that Ontario's diversity will be better represented. More political parties are likely to win seats, encouraging political parties to take distinctive stances on various issues, and work on gaining support rather than focusing on opposition.

Other countries with MMP, such as Germany and New Zealand, have discovered this system opens doors for more conversation between diverse parties, leading to new and creative solutions to old problems. MMP is more likely to lead to minority governments, which have been characterized as unstable. However, larger parties that are trying to form the government will need to negotiate with other parties in the legislature in order to implement their election platforms. In this negotiation process, smaller parties will likely have an opportunity to see a few of their issues addressed by the new government as well.

Further, under MMP, political parties will need to widely publish their list of candidates before the election. This process will be subject to public pressure to include a diversity of candidates, thereby increasing the likelihood that greater numbers of women, Aboriginals and visible minorities will be elected.

The referendum on October 10th is an exceptional opportunity for the citizens of Ontario to make their views known on how their representatives are chosen. These occasions do not occur often. Please encourage your friends and family to consider the question carefully, and to fill out the separate referendum ballot in support of electoral reform.

For more information, please visit these websites:

- CPJ's work on electoral reform: http://cpj.ca/otherwork/Electoral_Reform/
- Referendum Ontario (Elections Ontario): <http://www.yourbigdecision.ca/>
- Fair Vote Ontario: <http://www.voteformmp.ca/>
- Equal Voice <http://www.equalvoice.ca/>
- ACE Electoral Knowledge Network: <http://www.aceproject.org/>
- Ontario Citizens' Assembly: <http://www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca>

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309 Cooper Street, Suite 501, Ottawa, ON K2P 0G5

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