



Politics in BC: What do we want?

At the heart of democratic politics is a system of regular elections that allows citizens to make choices about their government and the people who control it. Electoral systems are designed to turn our individual choices into collective choices. Our vote is combined with many others to determine our political representatives. In different electoral systems, that process of combining votes works differently – with different political consequences.

Different electoral systems can have a significant impact on important features of our political landscape.

The people of British Columbia now have the opportunity to decide what kind of politics they want in this province – and choose an electoral system accordingly. There are no guarantees, but knowing what kind of politics we want – how we want political parties and BC's Legislative Assembly to operate – will clarify our thinking about electoral systems. And how we answer some key questions will shape our thinking about what kind of politics we want.

How adversarial or consensual do we want BC politics to be?

Politics in Canada (and in BC) is modeled on the law courts, with two opposing sides – the government and the opposition – vigorously arguing their positions and challenging their opponent's. The result tends toward adversarial politics. Accountability is clear and, on election day, the voter pronounces judgment.

Other political systems do not draw the line between government and opposition as clearly. They favour consensual politics, with multiple views represented in government. The result is often coalition governments and blurred accountability.

No political system is completely adversarial or completely consensual; it will have features of each. But different electoral systems will push our politics in one direction or the other.

Where should the balance of power lie between cabinet and the legislature?

In a parliamentary system, we elect members to a legislature who, in turn, choose the premier and cabinet, make the laws, and decide on taxes and spending. So, in effect, the premier and cabinet are accountable to the legislature. When, however, an electoral system has a tendency to produce majority governments, and that is combined with strict party discipline, the premier and cabinet are able to more easily dominate and the legislature is less able to hold the government accountable.

In order for the balance of power to shift back toward the legislature, changes must be made that weaken party discipline or that lessen the likelihood of majority governments, or both.

Changing electoral systems can address the likelihood of majority governments – although party discipline is only loosely affected by electoral system changes.

Do we need local representatives?

In our current system, we elect local people to represent the interests of a region – which we call a constituency or riding. This gives voters an identifiable political representative, and it gives representatives a clear, geographically-based constituency of voters. Yet party discipline may hamper an MLA's ability to vote the way his or her constituents wish.

Some electoral systems dispense with local representatives. Voters may, for example, elect representatives on a basis other than geography, or they may simply vote for a party and allow the party to designate all the representatives.

Should parties hold seats in the legislature in proportion to their share of the popular vote?

In our system, electoral contests are held simultaneously in a number of ridings around the province. Often, because there are a number of candidates (and parties) running in each riding, a representative is elected with less than 50 per cent of voter support. Frequently, the party that wins the election achieves less than 50 per cent of the popular vote across the province. Occasionally, as happened in BC in 1996, a party can win the election with fewer votes province-wide than the opposition party.

This system tends to exaggerate majorities in the legislature while under-representing smaller parties that achieved a significant percentage of the vote province-wide, but insufficient votes in any one riding to win a seat.

Some electoral systems ensure a party's strength in the legislature is directly proportional to its share of the vote; that is, its share of votes determines its share of seats. To achieve this *proportional representation*, these systems abandon exclusive use of single-member constituencies and shift the focus to parties and away from individual representatives.

Do voters get to make the kinds of choices they want?

Under our current system, BC voters are given a short list of names, together with the party affiliation of each, and are simply asked to choose one. The candidates on the list are determined by the respective political parties without voter input. Sometimes this simple choice creates hard decisions. What do we do if we like the candidate for Party X but prefer Party Z?

Other electoral systems allow the ballot to be organized in different ways, allowing the voter a wider range of choices, including:

- Choice among candidates
- Choice among candidates, including those from the same party
- Choice among parties
- Ranking of candidates and/or parties

Is increasing or changing the kind of choices on the ballot a good thing, or does it simply create more confusion and complication?

NOTE: More detailed information, including lecture notes, presentations and video recordings, is available on the Citizens' Assembly website.

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