



Plurality systems

The plurality system is currently used in British Columbia and throughout Canada. BC has used the plurality system in all provincial elections with the exception of 1952 and 1953, when the province experimented with a version of the *majority system* called the *alternative vote*.

The contestants in a plurality system election are individuals – frequently aligned with a political party – who want to represent an electoral district. The winner is the most popular candidate, the one who receives more votes than any other. Unlike majority systems, there is no requirement that the winner get more than 50 per cent of the vote.

Plurality systems with single-member districts

- One candidate is elected in each district and voters each have one vote
- Large parties tend to get more than their ‘share’ of the seats, while small parties tend to get less than their share of the seats unless their support is geographically concentrated
- The winning party usually gets a majority of seats without a majority of all votes – a so-called “artificial majority”

Plurality systems with single member districts are often compared to a race in which the winner is the one who crosses the finish line first. For this reason, the system is often called *First-Past-the-Post* (FPTP). For an animated illustration of how the single member district plurality system works visit www.seo.sa.gov.au/flash.htm, click on *Continue*, then *First-Past-the-Post*.

Plurality systems with multi-member districts

Plurality systems with multi-member districts have most of the same features as single-member plurality systems. There are several varieties of multi-member plurality systems:

Votes equal to seats or *block vote*

- Voters have the same number of votes as seats available in the district
- Voters cannot give more than one vote to any one candidate
- Voters may divide support between parties, but generally tend to vote along party lines
- Currently used in Vancouver to elect city councillors

Votes equal to seats or *cumulative vote*

- Voters have the same number of votes as seats available in the district
- Voters are able to indicate a strong preference while still voting for several candidates, by casting more than one of their votes for the same candidate.
- Used in some US cities and states

Votes less than seats or *limited vote*

- Voters have fewer votes than seats available in the district
- Parties may run more than one candidate
- Big party candidates tend to split the party vote among them
- Stimulates rivalry among candidates in same party and makes them very locally oriented
- Possibility for small parties to win a seat if they strongly support one candidate – sometimes called *semi-proportional*
- The share of votes required to win a seat – the *quota* – decreases as DM increases
- Used in Spain to elect their Senate

A variation of the “limited vote” is the *single non-transferable vote* system.

Single non-transferable vote (SNTV)

- Gives voters just one vote in a district that elects several legislators
- Tends to work like a proportional system with regard to vote-seat shares but like a plurality system with regard to generating majority
- Used in Korea and Taiwan

District magnitude (DM):

District magnitude is the number of representatives elected from an electoral district. DM = 1 is now the most common for plurality systems and the easiest to use. As discussed, where the DM is greater than 1, the number of votes a voter casts may or may not equal the number of representatives to be elected. The DM can vary from electoral district to electoral district.

Ballot structure

Voters are presented with a list of candidate names and simply place a mark beside the candidate(s) of their choice. As indicated above, in multi-member electoral districts there are several variations of ballots, each producing different effects.

Formula

Votes are counted on a district-by-district basis for individual candidates, not parties. Independent candidates can have their name on the ballot on the same basis as party candidates. Winning candidates are those with the most votes; there is no minimum number of votes a candidate needs to be elected. Votes cast for the non-elected candidates do not contribute to electing anyone and so are sometimes called “wasted votes.”

Additional Resources

This list of readings could be of interest to anyone wanting to know more about electoral reform. The Citizens' Assembly does not endorse the following books and articles or their projections. However, they are useful to illustrate some of the issues being considered by the Citizens' Assembly. A more extensive list is available on the Assembly's website.

Blais, André, and Louis Massicotte. 'Electoral Systems,' in Lawrence LeDuc, Richard G. Niemi and Pippa Norris (eds.). *Comparing Democracies: Elections and Voting in Global Perspective*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. 1996.

Farrell, D. *Electoral Systems: a Comparative Introduction*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001. [This is the book being issued by Assembly members as a reference book.]

Lijphart, Arend. *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-six Countries*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999.

State Electoral Office of South Australia Website <http://www.seo.sa.gov.au/>

- Animated “How your vote counts” explanation of various voting systems
- Other useful resources

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

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