

Proportional Representation

1. Definition

Proportional representation is a system of voting whereby a party obtains seats in the legislature, proportional to the number of votes it has collected in the election. Every citizen will have a chance to vote for any candidate in the province. Every candidate can get votes from out of the whole province, not from one riding only.

As recent elections have clearly shown, the "First past the pole system" does not produce a house that is a true reflection of the electorate. The governing party has 2/3 of the seats but is represented by only 40% of the popular vote. The term "majority vote" is a misnomer of grotesque proportions. In 1993 the P.C. had two seats in the House, while it has amassed more than 2 million votes. At the same time the Reform Party, reportedly a regional party from the West, had 850,000 votes in Ontario, resulting in only one seat. The arguments for electoral reform are overwhelming. Ignoring them will eventually result in disaster. More than anything else, it is the imbalance between the will of the people and what happens in Parliament that fuels the chronic dissatisfaction that Canadians have with Government.

2. Number of Seats in the Legislature.

This number has to be established before the elections will be called. Depending on the number of eligible voters in the province, this number may from time to time be changed, to reflect the preferred number of voters per seat. For the sake of argument we will assume a number of 109 seats.

Various countries have various relationships between the number of seats in the house and the size of the population. Our number of seats in the house is quite high. In PR their will almost always be a coalition government. In a coalition government the role of the opposition will be different. I expect it to be less adversarial and hopefully less acrimonious. This is because, unlike our present system, in PR the government will always be backed up by a majority of the population. This is an argument for a smaller house. With PR a house of 100 representatives will be quite adequate for a population the size of that of British Columbia..

2. Ridings

The number of ridings equals the number of seats in the Legislature. The ridings will have to have a near equal number of eligible voters. A candidate will have to run in a riding. No two candidates of the same party can run in the same riding. A candidate must have residence in the riding he/she is running in.

The system of ridings is not to be abolished. The ridings are needed for a reliable system of voter registration. Furthermore, British Columbians who want to have a local representative, somebody of the area that speaks on their behalf in parliament and who can be approached with problems and questions. There is still a strong expectation that the representative works for the local interest at the provincial level, instead of for the provincial interest on behalf of his riding. This might be considered as an immature political attitude, but for now it is a fact of life and has to be accommodated. Therefore, the ridings are there to stay. The near equal size of the ridings is important. It gives candidates a fair opportunity to acquire preferred votes (see below, par.9)

4. Voters Registry

Voters will have to be registered and, as a rule, will have to vote in a poll in their neighbourhood. ID will be required and a voter's card will have to be shown and handed over. As is done in the present system the name will be crossed out on the voters list. Early polls, poll by proxy and voting opportunities for citizens abroad will be provided.

Electronic voting systems are probably just over the horizon. That is however not the subject at the moment and will not interfere with PR.

5. Ballot

In P.R. the ballot is a fairly large sheet of paper that has the names of all the candidates of all the parties listed, sorted by the party they represent. The name of the leader of the party is on the top of the list of his party. His name is highlighted. The names of the other candidates are printed in an order as is decided by the party and is called the original order. This order can change after the election results are in.

For the voting public the ballot will be the biggest visible change. A strong resistance should be anticipated. It works in many European countries and there is no reason to believe that it would not work here. If not a necessity, it is a good idea to print the ballot in the newspapers before election day to give everybody a chance to get acquainted with it. It will be easier to find the candidate of one's choice if one knows where to look for it. The ballot will be handed to the voter in a folded manner and has to be returned in the same fashion.

6. Voting.

A vote is made by marking the name of the party leader or by marking the name of any other member of that party. A vote for the leader is a vote for the party. After the party leader has accumulated votes/seat number (see below, par. 7), then the excess number of votes that he collected will overflow to his party members. A vote for a member is attributed to that member and is called a preferred vote. If the member accumulates preferred votes equal to the votes/seat number, then his seat is guaranteed, independent of votes accumulated by other members of his party, including the party leader. He gains a preferred seat, to which certain privileges can be attached. If the member accumulates a number of votes smaller than the votes/seat number then his place on the candidate list of his party will be adjusted. The member with the highest number of preferred votes will be listed on the top. The next follow up will be listed below him and so on.

This is the novel part of this form of PR. This is the very mechanism where real power is returned into the hands of the voters. It is even possible that the leader of the party that wins a majority vote himself may not gain a seat, if the voters do not like him for whatever reason. I am not aware of any country at the moment practising this system but that should not be an argument against it. It is utterly simple with a logic that can appeal to any voter, independent of his/her sophistication. You vote for a person, whether that person represents a party or a philosophy or simply your interests. There will always a person in the house that is there because of your vote. A rare exception is where you give your vote to a candidate who collects not enough votes to collect overflow votes. (See par. 10)

7. Votes/seat number

The total number of valid ballots is divided by the number of seats in the house and this will be the votes/seat number. It is the number of votes required to get a seat in the house. For the sake of argument we will assume 1,264,625 valid ballots and therefore the votes/seat number will be 11,602

It is necessary to postpone the calculation of this number until all the ballots are in. With the help of computers this should be no problem. For reason of safety a parallel counting system should be set up and during election night estimates of this number can be made, based on partial results.

8. Tabulating the votes

PARTY	VOTES	SEATS	EXCESS VOTES	FINAL#SEATS
A	317,421	27	4167	* 28
B	269,365	23	2519	23
C	223,839	19	3401	19
D	166,903	14	4503	14
E	123,993	10	7973	* 11
F	89,788	7	8574	* 8
G	73,348	6	3736	6

Total Ballots 1,264,625

Total Seats obtained 106 (11,602 votes/seat)

Total excess ballots 34,813

34,813 ballots translate into three seats, so called leftover seats. These seats will be assigned to the three parties with the highest number of excess votes (marked*)

This is the only moment that there is a slight departure from PR. But seats cannot be divided and therefore, some form of tie breaking has to happen.

9. Preferred votes

Let us have a closer look at the results of party D: 166,931 votes.

The number of votes accumulated by the various members is shown in Column A. Subsequently, the order of the members will be adjusted according to the number of votes they have, column B. Lastly the overflow mechanism takes place, from the top down and then from the bottom up, resulting in the final vote count for each member, column C.

	A	B	C	
Leader	103,482	Leader	11,602	
#2	3,492	#4	11,602	Preferred Seat!
#3	4,396	#10	11,602	
#4	12,497	#6	11,602	
#5	3,394	#8	11,602	
#6	6,396	#3	11,602	
#7	3,898	#9	11,602	
#8	5,648	#7	11,602	
#9	3,994	#2	11,602	
#10	8,402	#5	11,602	
#11	1,290	#19	11,602	
#12	1,385	#18	11,602	
#13	1,297	#12	11,602	
#14	459	#13	11,602	
#15	398	#11	4,503	
#16	937	#17	0	
#17	1,289	#16	0	
#18	592	#14	0	
#19	1,785	#15	0	
Total:	166,931 Votes			

As noted before, the original order as assigned by the party does not necessarily coincide with the voters preference. Once again this is the real power of PR: it puts the decision power where it belongs: the voter. The 4503 votes that are left over will go to another party.

10. Vote distribution

The leader of the party and one more member have accumulated more votes than they need for their seat. The **overflow mechanism** will come in action. It is clear that the preference of the party did not coincide with the preference of the voters. Therefore, before the **overflow mechanism** can be activated, the original order of the candidates has to be changed into the order in which they have accumulated votes, the **definite order**. The excess votes of the leader and member #4 totals 92,775 They will overflow down the list down to the 14th member #13. By that time there are 693 overflow votes left and the remainder of the candidates have together 3810 votes. This adds up to 4503 votes and is not enough for a seat. The total number of excess votes of all the parties was 34,813 and this was to be allotted to the three parties with the highest number of excess votes. The last five members are not elected to the house.

Although these members are not elected to the house, the votes they collected are not wasted. In this case they help candidate #13 get his seat. This is in sharp contrast with the present system, where a vote for a not winning candidate is always wasted. However, the 4503 left excess are going to one of the three parties that have a higher number of excess votes. Nothing is perfect in life.