

British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform 3rd Weekend : Session 3 (Sunday morning)

Plurality Systems

This is the system most widely used in Canada and all British Columbia elections with the exception of the two majority system elections of the early 1950s.

1. BASIC PRINCIPLES

- The contestants are the individual candidates who are seeking to represent a particular electoral district
- The most popular candidate wins – that is the candidate who receives more votes than any other
This is often compared to a race in which the winner is the person who crosses the finish line first no matter how quickly, or slowly, they ran. For this reason the system is often called *First Past the Post* (FPTP)

2. KEY ELEMENTS

District Magnitude (DM):

- No necessary number but 1 is now the most popular and easy to work (but current Vancouver City Council operates a plurality system with a DM of 10)
- Where DM is greater than 1, the number of votes an individual voter may cast may or may not equal the number of seats (see more below under ballot structure)
- It is not necessary to have the same DM in every electoral district – differences were regularly part of every BC electoral map from 1871 until 1991

Ballot Structure:

- Voters are typically presented with a list of names
- Simple marks [**X**] are placed beside the candidate(s) chosen

- When electoral districts with more than one member to be elected are used there are three basic variations:
 - Under the so-called “*bloc vote*” voters may have the same number of votes as there are seats to be filled. Voters cannot give more than one vote to any single candidate but need not choose to assign all their votes. They may vote for all the candidates of the same party but they may also spread votes among candidates of several parties / independents
 - Under “*cumulative vote*” variations voters can cast more than one of their votes for the same candidate
 - Under “*limited vote*” variations voters may have fewer votes than there are seats to be filled.
The Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) system gives voters just one vote in a district that elects several legislators
- Each of these three variants can produce quite different effects.

Formula:

- Votes are counted on a district-by-district basis for individual candidates, not parties
- Winners are those candidates with the most votes: there is no minimum number of votes a candidate needs to be elected
- All votes cast for ‘other’ candidates do not contribute to electing anyone (sometimes these are called “wasted votes”)

Note:

- Parties are free to run candidates in as many or as few electoral districts as they choose.
- In the last (2000) Canadian election only one party (Liberals) ran a candidate in every constituency in the country
- In the last (2001) BC election 16 parties nominated candidates in more than one district but only 3 (Liberals, NDP and Marijuana) had candidates in every district
- Independents also can have their name on the ballot on the same formal basis as party candidates

3. EXAMPLES

To be clear on how these systems work consider our five person race in Australian suburbia: [_www.seo.sa.gov.au/flash.htm](http://www.seo.sa.gov.au/flash.htm) (click on Continue, then First Past The Post)
Note the following:

- ✓ Simple voting
- ✓ Simple counting and winner determination
- ✓ Winners total is less than half (when more than 2 candidates)
- ✓ Several minorities add up to more than winner
- ✓ Here is the logic for contestants to amalgamate to make a 2-party contest. If all those minorities got together behind one other candidate he or she might have won

The plurality system tends to work differently depending upon the DM and the ballot choices the voters have available.

Single-member districts with one vote (*Canada*)

Single-Member Plurality OR First Past The Post

- Large parties get more than their 'share' of the seats
- Small parties regularly get less than their share of the seats
- Regionally concentrated small parties may get a 'seat bonus'
- Winning party usually gets a majority of seats without a majority of all votes
- Local candidates may or may not have a majority of support in individual constituencies:
 - in 2001 1/4 of BC MLAs elected did not have a local majority
 - in 1996 2/3 of BC MLAs did not have a majority in their constituency

Multi-member districts with votes equal to seats (*ex-British Columbia, Vancouver*) ***the 'block vote'***

- Has most of the same features as single-member plurality
- Increasing DM tends to actually decrease proportionality
- In principle, voters may divide support between parties
- In practice, party voting exaggerates advantage given to large winning parties
 - in 1983 all 7 BC multi-member districts elected MLAs from same party
 - in 1986 16 / 17 BC multi-member districts elected MLAs from same party

Multi-member districts with cumulative votes (*various American cities and states*)
the 'cumulative vote'

- Allows voters to indicate a strong preference while still voting for several candidates
- Can be semi-proportional as it will allow minorities to cumulate their votes behind a candidate and so get some representation

Multi-member districts with votes less than seats (*Spain-Senate*)
the 'limited vote'

- Candidates of big parties tend to split party vote among them
- Stimulates rivalry among local party candidates in same party and makes them very locally oriented
- Provides the possibility for small party to win a seat if they concentrate behind one candidate (sometimes called semi-proportional)
- The share of votes required to win a seat (the QUOTA) decreases as DM increases
(District Magnitude=4 Votes=3 Quota=42.9%)

Single Non-Transferable Vote – one vote case (*Korea, Taiwan, ex-Japan*)

- tends to work like a proportional system with regard to vote-seat shares
- tends to work more like plurality system with regard to generating majority governments
(District Magnitude=4 Votes=1 Quota=20%)

4. BALLOT DESIGN

In SMP systems this is rarely an issue although the order in which names are listed on the ballot is sometimes thought to make a small difference with an advantage going to people whose names are at the beginning of the alphabet

In Multi-member systems then ballot arrangements can make a difference. Think about the different tasks required of voters in these three ways of providing for the election of five candidates. What signals do the different forms send? Would the voter be in a different situation if she could only cast 3 votes? If he could give more than one to a single candidate?

VOTE FOR UP TO 5 CANDIDATES

Angela	
Brad	
Claude	
Dan	
Edith	
Frankie	
Gladys	
Harley	
Ian	
Julie	
Katie	
Lianne	
Manjit	
Nick	
Paul	
Ron	

Angela	<i>Red</i>	
Brad	<i>Blue</i>	
Claude	<i>Gold</i>	
Dan	<i>Blue</i>	
Edith	<i>Blue</i>	
Frankie	<i>Gold</i>	
Gladys	<i>Gold</i>	
Harley	<i>Red</i>	
Ian	<i>Blue</i>	
Julie	<i>Red</i>	
Katie	<i>Independent</i>	
Lianne	<i>Blue</i>	
Manjit	<i>Gold</i>	
Nick	<i>Red</i>	
Paul	<i>Red</i>	
Ron	<i>Gold</i>	

<i>Red Candidates</i>	
Angela	
Harley	
Julie	
Nick	
Paul	
<i>Blue Candidates</i>	
Brad	
Dan	
Edith	
Ian	
Lianne	
<i>Gold Candidates</i>	
Claude	
Frankie	
Gladys	
Manjit	
Ron	
<i>Independents</i>	
Katie	

5. EVALUATION

Stable Government

- * Likely to produce one-party majority governments
- * 1-party majorities typically last longer than minorities or coalitions

Electoral Accountability

- * Encourages 2-party competition
- * Stimulates Government vs. Opposition contests that make elections a forum in which voters can effectively choose who is to be in office
- * Allows voters to support (or oppose) an individual local candidate
- * Provides for local representation (especially with low DM)

Parliamentary Check on Government / Role of Members

- * Majorities free governments from serious parliamentary scrutiny (except perhaps within own caucus in private)
- * Allows for Prime Ministerial government (“the friendly dictatorship”)
- * All Members of the legislature have same electoral standing and a similar identifiable constituency

Fair Representation of Parties and Social Groups

- * Creates big distortions between vote shares and seat shares
- * Under-represents groups (e.g. women & minorities) traditionally excluded from political and legislative life

Democratic Political Parties

- * Smaller number of parties
- * Parties tend to be non-ideological, pragmatic vote gathering machines seeking to attract the median voter
- * Political bargaining occurs *within* parties
- * Parties may be decentralized to accommodate local electoral demands

Voter Choice

- * Simple identification of preferred individual(s)

Identifiable Representation

- * Local areas have identified individual elected to represent it
- * Strong incentives for elected Members to service constituents

Encouragement to Participate

- * Clear personalized choice and simple counting makes for transparent, understandable process
- * Individuals in areas where their party has a big advantage or no chance may have reduced incentive to vote
- * Voter turnout seems to be slightly (2-5%) lower than in PR systems

Equality of the Vote

- * Requires electoral districts to be of equal size
- * Continual redrawing of the district boundaries is necessary in a highly mobile society
- * Votes for leading candidates contribute to election of representative; votes for others do not

6. TRADE-OFFS

Plurality System Strengths

- Regularly produces stable 1-party majority government able to act at will
- Identifiable local representatives chosen in and for each area
- Limits the proliferation of minor political parties
- Governments and Members are accountable through a clear, simple electoral contest
- System is easy to use and to understand
- We know how it works in our society

Plurality System Weaknesses

- Allows the Government to easily dominate parliament
- Distorts the vote – seat relationship so there is no obvious, predictable of regular connection between the two
- Minority interests / small voices get shut out
- Gives voters a simple either-or choice, often between 2 major parties that hardly differ
- Votes do not count equally in electing MLAs; many votes do not contribute to electing anyone
- Voter turnout tends to be slightly lower

7. PLURALITY IN BC

Think about the last 50 years. Keeping the current electoral system will probably contribute to keeping the same kind of politics.