



Legislatures, elections, representation and parties

In a democracy, we expect government to be responsive to citizens and accountable for its activities. Periodic elections give citizens an opportunity to select their political representatives and hold them accountable.

Legislative assembly

In Canada, governments are accountable to the legislative assembly, because the premier and ministers – the cabinet – are, technically, chosen by the members of the legislative assembly from among those elected to the assembly.

The functions of the legislative assembly are:

- Make laws
- Raise and spend funds
- Oversee the work of government
- Discuss matters of public concern

In order to remain in office, the cabinet – or “government of the day” – must keep the support of a majority of representatives in the legislative assembly. Ministers, who are responsible for policy and the administration of their departments, are open to questions and scrutiny in the assembly. The assembly can force a government to resign by withdrawing its support. If this happens, the opposition members may be called on to form an alternative government – or a general election may be called.

Types of governments based on election results

Depending on election results, governments may be formed in different ways:

Majority government

- The party with a majority of representatives in the legislature forms the government
- Voting is normally by party blocs
- The governing party controls the business of the assembly

Coalition government

- Coalitions can be arranged between two parties when no party possesses a majority of seats
- In coalition governments, two (or more) parties agree to share government and divide ministerial positions between them
- Because of the nature of a coalition, compromise over policy may be necessary
- Coalition governments can collapse and fall when policy differences arise between coalition parties

Minority government

- When no party has a majority of seats in the legislative assembly
- The party with the largest number of seats in the assembly forms a government and is supported in the assembly by another party (or parties)
- The supporting party supports the government in office but not necessarily its legislative program

Representatives – members of the legislative assembly (MLAs)

Current activities of MLAs:

- Attend meetings of the assembly and vote to support the party
- Participate in caucus (party) meetings
- Prepare for debates and committee activity
- Lobby on behalf of constituents
- Respond to concerns of residents within the MLA's riding and participate in community functions, etc.

Political parties and party competition

In most world democracies, political parties have arisen to articulate and package ideas and interests, recruit candidates, campaign on identifiable platforms, and organize and operate governments and oppositions. *Party discipline* means that party members agree to campaign on the same issues, vote together and defend the party's position on issues. In Canada, political parties generally strive to balance national party discipline with local organizational autonomy.

Some electoral systems tend toward two-party competition, while others engender multi-party competition. In systems dominated by two large parties, these parties tend to be centre-of-the-road with minor policy differences and much of the policy debate takes place within the parties. In multi-party systems, voters generally have wide choice between ideologically distinct parties, and debate over government policies takes place between parties in the legislature.

Questions to consider

When examining the different electoral systems, a number of key questions are important in order to determine the priorities and values of British Columbians when it comes to electoral reform. Ask yourself:

- *What are the costs and benefits of majority, coalition and minority governments?*
- *What should be expected from members of the legislative assembly?*
- *How important is local representation?*
- *Does it matter how many political parties we have? How many should there be?*
- *Do we want an electoral system that makes it easy for new parties to grow?*
- *Is multi-party or two-party competition better for BC?*
- *How should candidates be chosen and by whom?*

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

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