



Why electoral reform?

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For most of the last century (and more), BC has employed the plurality, “first-past-the-post” electoral system with few complaints. This system has generally produced stable majority governments with clear electoral accountability and identifiable local representatives. In recent years, however, some British Columbians have expressed concerns about several aspects of our current system.

1) Should all votes count equally?

In our electoral system, the size of electoral districts – or constituencies – is crucial. When there are big differences in constituency size, votes do not count equally.

For example, in 1983, the MLA from Atlin, a community in northern BC, represented 4,195 voters, whereas a Surrey MLA represented 56,576 voters – 12 times as many. Although he won more than 34,000 votes, MLA Ernie Hall lost his seat in Surrey, while in Atlin, Al Passarell won his seat with fewer than 1,600 votes. These differences in constituency size allowed the NDP to win the Atlin seat with 1,587 votes; the Social Credit party needed 38,081 to win the Surrey riding. This led to the argument that votes in Atlin were worth 12 times as much as those in Surrey.

BC has since reorganized its electoral map to make districts more similar in size. Today, BC constituencies can vary by up to plus or minus 25 per cent from the provincial average.

2) Artificial majorities

A party needs a plurality of votes (not a majority) to win a seat in a district. For example, in a constituency with five candidates, the winner could take the seat with 20 per cent + 1 of the votes, a far cry from a true majority of 50 per cent + 1. This means that a party could win a majority of seats without a majority of votes, creating an “artificial majority.”

3) Wrong winners

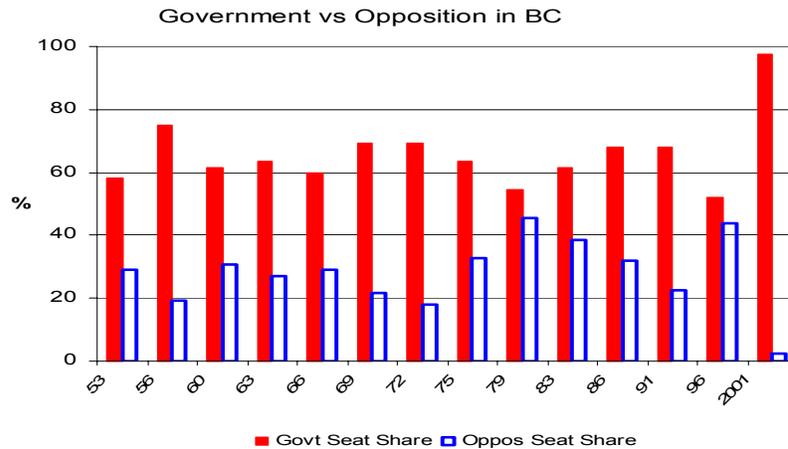
When a party wins lots of seats by smallish margins, and loses others by larger amounts, the totals can add up in very peculiar ways. As a result, a party could win the most seats without having the largest share of the vote. This is a normal – but infrequent – consequence of the system.

4) Oversized governments

Our system creates artificial majorities and, by the same token, tends to produce a weak opposition. In a few recent instances in Canada, the electoral system produced either no opposition or an opposition so small that it had no capacity to do its job.

New Brunswick	1988 (0 opposition seats)
Prince Edward Island	1989 (2), 1993 (1), 2000 (1)
British Columbia	2001 (2)

On average, governments in BC have twice the number of seats as the opposition.



5) Under-representation of women and minorities

In BC, the record of the last five elections suggests the numbers of women in the legislature grew quickly in the early 1990s but has levelled off or perhaps even declined since. At last count, women constitute about 20 per cent of the legislators in Canada.

Different systems appear to make a difference to the proportion of women and minorities elected. Generally speaking, electoral systems which incorporate higher “district magnitudes” and proportional representation list systems are more likely to produce women in the legislature. A recent examination of the world’s major post-industrial democratic societies produced the following compiled statistics:

<i>electoral system</i>	<i>% women in national legislature</i>
Plurality / Majority	16.9
Mixed: constituency-proportional	19.4
Proportional representation (list)	29.5

Why are there such differences? While the causes of these differences are not clear, in plurality and majority systems, parties are more limited in their control over who the candidates are than in proportional representation systems. In plurality and majority systems, with only one or two nominations available, there is often a vigorous local contest the outcome of which cannot easily be controlled. Proportional systems that require a party to present a list of candidates in the order they are to be elected, offers the party leadership considerable influence over who is nominated and ultimately elected.

Other Canadian electoral reform initiatives

Initiatives for reform are getting started elsewhere in Canada too. Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario and the Yukon are currently looking at various ways of reviewing their electoral systems – as is the City of Vancouver.

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

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