

A voter's guide to electoral reform *by Gary Dale*

This article attempts, as its title suggests, to explain the various voting systems which could be recommended by the Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform for the Province of Ontario. In doing so, I hope that the voters will be able to make a more informed choice when the question is put to them in the referendum that will be part of this year's provincial election.

While this article does not attempt to push a particular voting system, I will admit that I believe our current first-past-the-post system needs to be replaced.

Every government electoral system is geographically based because every government controls a geographical area. What differs are the details. The details will be explored in this article.

The primary distinction between voting systems is the number people you elect. Either you elect one or you elect more than one. I will deal with the simple case where you elect one person first.

Electing a single candidate:

When you vote for one person, some people's votes will count while others won't. If you supported the winning candidate, your vote counts. Otherwise it is discarded. In the first-past-the-post system used in Ontario's provincial elections (and in Canada's federal elections), the person who gets the most votes wins. His or her supporters votes count while everyone else's is discarded. Frequently more votes are discarded than were used to elect the successful candidate.

This is a serious problem because it distorts the voter's intentions. The majority of voters may lean one way but have their vote split among several candidates allowing a different minority bloc of voters to win the election.

This also leads to voters trying to prevent a bad result rather than voting for the candidate of their choice.

There are numerous options for minimizing these problems. They are based on using various methods of identifying voter preferences. The end result is that the elected candidate is somewhat acceptable to the majority of voters even if he or she was not their preferred candidate.

All of the preference-based systems push candidates to propose platforms that are broadly acceptable. While this might seem reasonable, it should be noted that it narrows the spectrum of voices that will be heard. When you are electing only one position, such as a mayor or president, this is unavoidable.

When you are voting for one of many representatives, such as to a legislative assembly or parliament, this narrowing of voices distorts the voters' intent even more than the first past the post system does. To see how this happens, imagine that there are three parties, A, B and C, contesting an election. If parties A and C

are on opposite ends of a political spectrum while B is perceived as being in the middle, then party B will be more acceptable to people whose preference is A or C than C or A would be. This can frequently lead to party B winning more seats than even the first past the post system would give them. While everyone might get a somewhat acceptable representative, fewer people get their preferred candidate.

To get around these problems, most of the world's electoral systems involve electing for more than one candidate in a geographic region.

Electing more than one candidate:

By allowing voters to elect more than one candidate, you can achieve some degree of proportionality. That is to say, if 30% of the voters vote one way, they will elect people to 30% of the available seats. This means that fewer votes are discarded.

Votes will still be discarded if the candidates or party don't get enough votes to win a seat. For example, if 10 seats are being filled, you get a seat for every 10% of the vote. If you don't get enough votes, you don't get a seat.

Your vote might also be discarded if your vote didn't translate into additional seats. If a party got 36% of the vote in this example, they would still only get 3 seats. The additional 6% would be discarded.

The more seats that are up for election, the fewer votes are discarded. If 100 people were to be elected, it would only take 1% to get each seat. Only fractional percentages would be discarded.

Voting systems for electing more than one candidate differ primarily in two ways. The first is the number of candidates to be elected. More seats means fewer wasted votes.

The second difference is in how the candidates are chosen. If you have a large number of seats to fill, such as electing an entire provincial parliament, it is unreasonable to expect voters to be able to know enough about all of the candidates to make a reasonable choice. In this situation, parties usually present a ranked list of candidates and the voters cast a single ballot for the party of their choice. Each party gets as many seats as their share of the vote gives them, which they fill by starting at the top of their list and working down.

This is known as a closed list. The parties determine their candidates and their ranking internally.

If you are filling a small number of seats, another option is to allow voters to do their own rankings. In what is called an open list system, you still only vote for one party but you can rank that party's candidates according to your preferences.

Other systems discard the party vote entirely and you simply rank the available candidates. Depending on the mechanics of the counting process, this is alternately called either a free-list or single-transferable-vote system.

Open-list, free-list and single-transferable-vote systems need the number of people to be elected to be small enough for voters to make a reasonable choice among candidates. With free-list and single-transferable-vote systems, the problem is compounded by the need to evaluate candidates from multiple parties!

The freedom to rank candidates at the ballot box is traded off against the number of discarded votes. Closed list systems minimize the number of discarded vote because they can cover the entire region being governed. Other list systems require dividing the governed area into manageable regions. Free-list and single-transferable vote systems generally have fewer seats per region than open-lists.

Local Representation:

Some people are concerned about a "loss of local representation" under any of the previous systems. And while it is true that geography does play some role in decision making, it is just one of many factors. For example, would an aboriginal from the city of Hamilton be more or less able to represent a person living on a reserve near James Bay than a person of European decent living in Sudbury?

Also, "local representation" forces the elected representative to be able to handle a wide range of issues for his constituency. The other choice would be having each party assign, as they currently do, responsibility for certain issues and voters would deal with the people responsible for that issue - either in the government or in one of the opposition parties according to their preferences.

Nonetheless, the issue of locality is presented in a number of systems. The simplest of these is to divide the area being governed into a number of regions and use a list-based within each region. For example, Northern Ontario could be one region and it would be allocated some number of seats. By adopting some form of regionalism, you are again dealing with fewer seats per region and therefore discarding more votes than if regions were not used.

Mixed systems:

Another option is to merge the first-past-the-post system with a list-based system. In these hybrids you may cast a single ballot or you may vote independently for your local representative and for the party you wish to govern. This creates two types of representatives - those with local constituency duties and those without. These electoral systems are generally called mixed-member proportional systems because they have these two types of members being elected.

Party lists are used to compensate for imbalances caused by the first-past-the-post local representative elections.

If you cast a single vote, the party of the candidate you voted for is assumed to be your choice for government too. If you can vote separately for the party, then your choice for local candidate doesn't need to be the same as your choice for overall government. This allows "strategic voting" to prevent a disliked local candidate from getting elected while still allowing you to select which party you prefer to form the government.

In these mixed systems the party lists options include the one available in the pure list systems discussed above. Some additional options become available however. Most notably, the defeated candidates from each party can form the party's list, with the ranking taken from the number of local votes each candidate got.

It is important to have a large number of list-based seats available in a mixed system. Otherwise the vagaries of the first-past-the-post system cannot be fully compensated for. It generally requires between 1/3 and half of the seats to be list based, with 40% being regarded as an adequate number to achieve reasonable results.

Other considerations:

Some systems use a threshold percentage below which a party cannot be allocated seats. While it is true that some districts that don't have artificial thresholds sometimes have a proliferation of small parties elected, this does not seem to be related to the use of thresholds but rather is an indication of divisions within the society. Artificial thresholds can mask these divisions but they do not eliminate them. They do however make it harder for some voices to be heard which is rarely a good thing.

Moreover, while political parties are an essential element in any electoral system, they become more so in proportional representation (PR) systems. The reason for this is that it is difficult for individuals who are not either wealthy or well connected to wealth to raise money for a campaign even with today's ridings. When larger geographical areas have to be dealt with, a central party campaign provides economies that can allow individuals representing lower-income groups to participate effectively. These practical concerns limit the ability of fringe groups to unduly influence governments without the need to impose artificial and essentially undemocratic thresholds.

At the same time, these practical concerns require strict spending limits and controls on donations so that wealth does not drown out opposing voices. These controls need to extend to third-party campaigns so they don't become an adjunct to a party's campaign.

Many people are under the impression that proportional representation leads to unstable minority governments. While it is true that a small number of jurisdictions do have frequent changes of government, this is the exception rather than the rule. And there is no evidence that their jurisdictions are suffering because of it. PR jurisdictions tend not to suffer from "policy lurch" as

small changes in voter preferences leads to a different majority government in first-past-the-post systems. And with PR systems, parties have little reason to force an election when a change in alliances achieves the desired result quickly and safely (no need to try to appeal to a fickle electorate).

In closing:

The first-past-the-post system used by Ontario and by the federal government has little to recommend it. It is in fact the second worst system available - only slightly better than preferential ballot systems. There are a variety of alternative electoral systems that have proven their worth throughout the world. While there are differences in implementation details that lead some people to prefer one over another in a particular situation, any reasonably implemented proportional representation system will be substantially better than what we have now.