

## The Electoral System

An electoral system is the method used to elect members of parliament. The electoral system determines how candidates are elected and how governments can be formed. Canada uses the **first-past-the post electoral system**. Canada has 308 electoral districts or ridings. Candidates from political parties run in each of these ridings. The winner of the riding wins the seat and becomes an MP. Those candidates who place second, or third place receive no reward. This is a winner take all system. Below is an example of how this system works in 10 randomly chosen ridings in Canada. The check marks represent the winner of the riding and elected MP.

Constituencies			
Vancouver-Centre	party	popular vote	%
1. John	Conservatives	41	✓
2. Ted	Liberals	34	
3. Susan	NDP	20	
4. Maurice	Green Party	4	
Vancouver- East			
1. William	NDP	59	✓
2. Janice	Liberals	27	
3. Edward	Conservatives	11	
4. Duncan	Green party	2	
Victoria			
1. Jennifer	Liberals	36	✓
2. Laurie	Conservatives	35	
3. David	NDP	29	
Calgary- Northwest			
1. Rob	Conservatives	61	✓
2. Mike	Liberals	25	
3. Kyle	NDP	10	
4. Francis	Green party	3	
Edmonton-South			
1. Lance	Conservatives	43	✓
2. Ian	Liberals	28	
3. Terry	NDP	21	
4. James	Green Party	6	
Moose-Jaw Lake Centre			
1. Chuck	Conservatives	39	✓
2. Larry	NDP	36	
3. Hugh	Liberals	22	
Winnipeg Centre			
1. Mary	Liberals	41	✓
2. David	Conservatives	30	
3. Gary	NDP	26	
4. Tom	Green party	3	
Quebec- Centre			
1. Marie	Bloc Quebecois	39	✓
2. Gilles	Liberals	32	
3. David	Conservatives	19	
4. Fred	NDP	9	

Pontiac			
1. Jean	Conservatives	40	✓
2. Luc	Bloc Quebecois	38	
3. Marc	Liberals	14	
4. Henri	NDP	5	
St. John's- East			
1. Don	Conservatives	42	✓
2. Patricia	Liberals	35	
3. Lawrence	NDP	21	

### Results:

Seats won	% of pop. vote
Conservatives- 6	33.6
Liberals- 2	29.4
NDP- 1	23.6
BQ- 1	7.7
Green Party -0	1.8

**Discuss with a partner how the Conservatives were able to win most of the ridings even though they received well under 40% of the popular vote**

Read Counterpoints p. 253 The Electoral System

List the advantages and disadvantages of the first-past-the post electoral system

Advantages	Disadvantages

Refer to Fig 10-10 on p. 254 as you answer the following questions:

1. In which year did the governing party win 50 percent of the vote?
2. Explain how the Liberal Party formed government in 1997 with less than 40 percent of the vote.
3. Explain how in 1993 the Bloc Quebecois became the official opposition when the Reform Party gained a larger number of votes?

The alternative to the first-past-the-post electoral system is **proportional representation**. In this system, used in many countries in Europe, the popular vote total of each party determines the number of seats in parliament. Normally candidates are chosen from party lists. In other words a party which receives 35% of the vote, will receive 35 seats in a 100 seat parliament.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of this system:

advantages	disadvantages

## ACTIVITIES

1. In some countries, like Australia, voting in elections is compulsory for eligible voters. Do you think Canada should adopt this system? Why or why not?
2. Because of the size of the country and the number of time zones, results of federal elections in the East are announced half an hour before voting stations are closed in British Columbia. Some people argue that this can influence the way people in the West vote. Do you consider this a problem that should be addressed? Why or why not?
3. Do you think the voting age should be lowered to seventeen? Prepare a letter to send to your member of Parliament to explain your opinion.
4. An election, it is often said, is won on the backs of the volunteers. What types of jobs are done to help get someone elected in Canadian elections? How important do you think volunteers are in running election campaigns? Why might people volunteer to work in a campaign?
5. Research how public opinion polls are conducted. What are their drawbacks? How reliable do you think they are in reflecting public opinion?

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When the polls close, the votes are counted and the candidate with the most votes in each riding is announced the winner. This is called the **first-past-the-post system**. The winner does not necessarily have to win a majority of the votes cast; he or she simply has to win more votes than any of the other candidates. This system has the virtue of being simple and straightforward. Its supporters also argue that it means there is usually a clear winner of elections and that minority governments do not often happen. However, the result does not always represent the wishes of the majority of voters (see Figure 10-8).

First-past-the-post is so named because a candidate has only to win more votes than his nearest competitor to take the riding, not an absolute majority of the votes cast. The most direct conse-

Candidate	Votes
Herb Dhaliwal, Liberal	17 705
Ron Jack, Canadian Alliance	15 384
Herschel Hardin, New Democratic Party	3 848
Dan Tidball, Progressive Conservative	2 649
Others	1 880

**Figure 10-8** The results of the federal election of 2000 in the riding of Vancouver–Burnaby.

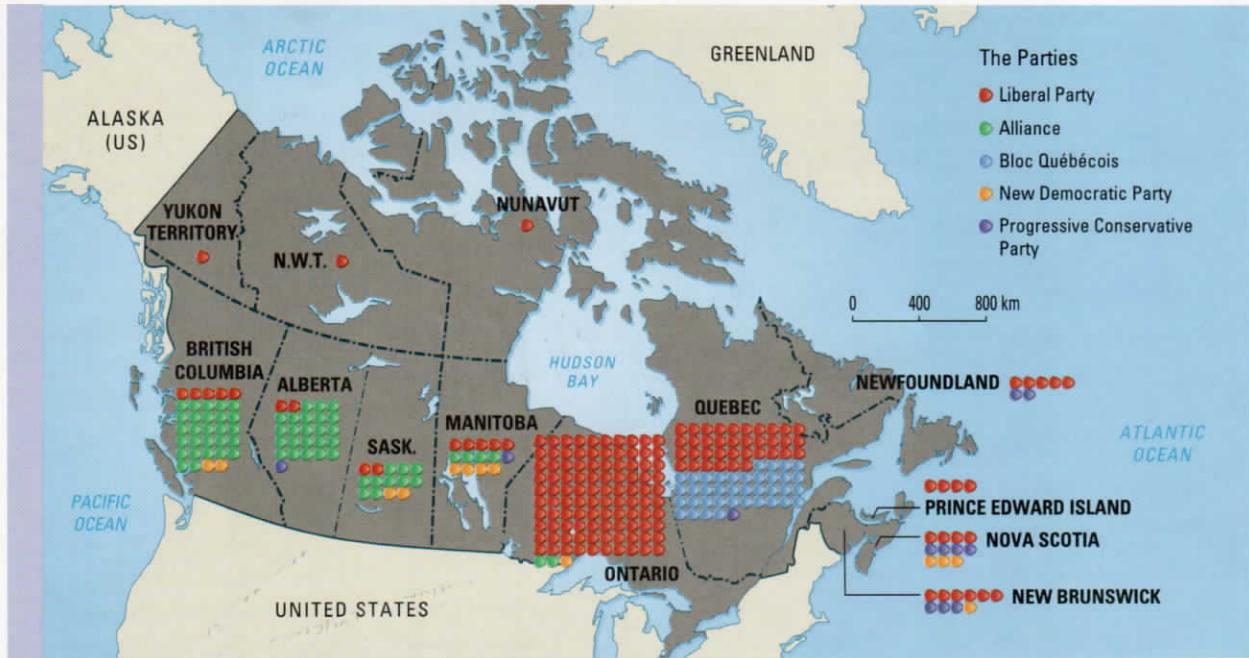
**Thinking critically** Did Herb Dhaliwal win 50 per cent or more of the votes? Should a candidate or a government have to win 50 per cent or more of votes cast? Explain your opinion.

quence is to exaggerate the majority enjoyed by the winning party, often grotesquely: with less than half the popular vote, governments have been formed with nearly all of the seats.... [I]t produces results that are increasingly at odds with voters' desires.

Source: Andrew Coyne, *Toronto Star*, October 17, 1996.

For this reason, some people advocate a switch to some form of **proportional representation** (PR). PR systems are used in countries such as Israel, Holland, and Italy. Each political party puts forward a list of all its candidates. Voters support a candidate on the basis of the party he or she represents. The number of seats a party wins in the legislature is based on the total number of votes it receives. For example, in a 100-seat legislature, a party that received 38 per cent of the popular vote would have thirty-eight seats in the legislature. The candidates who got the most votes from the party's list would fill the thirty-eight seats.

One objection is that this kind of PR system would mean that local representation—having an MP allocated to each riding—would disappear, or change. Another is that, since most elections using PR do not give one party a majority, parties often have to create coalitions, or alliances, to form a government. The experience in some other countries appears to be that these coalitions often cannot be maintained for very long.



**Figure 10-9** Results of the 2000 election by province.

**Reading a map**

1. How does this map support the view that the Bloc Québécois and Canadian Alliance are regional parties?

2. The Liberal Party claims to be the only party that can call itself a "national" party. How does this map support that claim? How does it not?

**Figure 10-10** In 2000, a simple majority in Parliament required 151 seats.

**Reading a table**

1. In which year did the governing party win 50 per cent of the vote?
2. Explain how the Liberal Party formed the government in 1997 with less than 40 per cent of the vote.
3. Explain how in 1993 the Bloc Québécois became the opposition party when the Reform party gained a larger number of votes.
4. Why do you think the present system of voting causes regional dissent in Canada? Explain your answer.

Party	1984	1988	1993	1997	2000
<b>Bloc Québécois</b>					
% of votes			13.5	10.7	11
Number of seats			54	44	38
<b>Reform/Canadian Alliance</b>					
% of votes		n/a	18.7	19.4	26
Number of seats		1	52	59	66
<b>Liberal</b>					
% of votes	28	32	41.3	38.4	41
Number of seats	40	83	<b>177</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>172</b>
<b>New Democratic Party</b>					
% of votes	19	20	6.9	11.1	n/a
Number of seats	30	43	9	21	13
<b>Progressive Conservative</b>					
% of votes	50	43	16	18.9	n/a
Number of seats	<b>211</b>	<b>169</b>	2	19	12
<b>Others</b>					
% of vote	3	5	3.6	1.5	0
Number of seats	1	2	1	2	0
<b>Total seats</b>	282	295	295	301	301

n/a = not available  
Governing parties are indicated in bold type.