

PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

This week, British Columbians begin receiving ballots to vote on whether to change the province's voting system to proportional representation from the traditional first-past-the-post system.

Voters are first asked to indicate whether they want to change to pro-rep from the first-past-the-post system.

Then, they are asked to rank three proportional representation systems. Each maintains local and regional representation but uses different mechanisms to ensure that if a party passes the five per cent popular vote threshold, it will have a proportionate share of the seats in the legislature.

The ballot, which Elections B.C. says should arrive in mailboxes between Oct. 22 and Nov. 2, will ask two questions.

The first question for voters is whether they want to stick with the existing first-past-the-post system — in which each of the 87 ridings is represented by a single MLA who is the top vote winner in the election — or change to proportional representation.

Voters are also being asked to rank three different proportional representation systems.

Voters can answer one or both questions, and can rank the following three representation systems even if they vote no to change. Under all the proportional representation systems, more ridings could be added, up to a total of 95.

- Dual member proportional: Most single-MLA ridings are combined with a neighbouring riding to form two-MLA ridings. A few large, rural ridings continue to be represented by a single MLA. This dual member system has not been used anywhere in the world.
- Mixed member proportional: Sixty per cent of the MLAs are directly elected under the first-past-the-post system in ridings and the other 40 per cent of seats are distributed to ensure seat totals reflect the popular vote. (This system is used in countries such as Germany and New Zealand.)
- Rural-urban proportional: Combines two different systems for urban and rural parts of B.C. The urban ridings use a single transferable vote system, where candidates are ranked on a single ballot in large ridings. The candidate with the fewest votes is dropped and votes redistributed to the second choice on each ballot. The process continues until a candidate has 50 per cent plus one of the votes. (This system is used in countries such as Ireland.) The rural ridings are determined using the mixed member system.

Different Versions of Democracy

Under the existing first-past-the post system, in which each voter casts a ballot in one of 87 electoral districts in B.C., the winning candidate in each riding often receives less than a majority of the votes. Across the province, this results in a party winning a greater portion of seats than is reflected by their popular vote.

In 2005, the B.C. Liberals won 46 seats with 45.8 per cent of the vote, while the NDP won 33 seats, 13 fewer, with 41.5 per cent of the vote. The Greens, with 9.2 per cent of the vote, did not win a seat.

In 2001, the B.C. Liberals won 57 per cent of the popular vote and 77 of the then 79 ridings, or 97.5 per cent of the seats. The NDP won just two seats with 21.6 per cent of the vote. The Greens won no seats with 12.4 per cent of the vote.

This winner-take-all system almost always creates a majority government.

Proportional representation leans the other way. By creating a system where no one party earns enough seats to form a majority government, it requires parties to come together in a coalition after an election in order to form a government.

Political scientists say that process tends to create a consensual-type of government that is forced to co-operate and compromise.

Coalitions are also formed in the current first-past-the-post system under so-called big-tent parties — like the NDP and Liberals in B.C. — but they are almost always formed before voters cast a ballot.