



Provincial Election 2007



Electoral Reform Changing the Way We Vote

On October 10, 2007, Ontario voters will decide whether or not to adopt a new system of voting in provincial elections.

The government passed legislation last year which mandated the establishment of a Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, much like what was done in British Columbia. The Citizens' Assembly's 103 members were randomly selected in June 2006. Their mandate was to examine Ontario's current electoral system and learn about other systems. They heard submissions at province-wide public meetings, examined on-line submissions, and were instructed by academics versed in electoral systems world-wide. At the end of the process, the Citizens' Assembly made their decision – to recommend changing our voting system. As per the legislation, the government will put the question to voters in a province-wide referendum to be held in conjunction with the October 10, 2007 provincial election.

The system recommended as a better alternative by the Citizens' Assembly is Mixed Member Proportional (MMP). This is the system also supported by the labour movement and other progressive organizations. It is currently in use in Germany, New Zealand, and elsewhere.

MMP combines a number of seats elected by our traditional First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) system with a proportionality feature. Voters will cast two votes: one for a local candidate (as now) and one for a party. The party vote is the popular vote and will determine the total number of seats a party wins. Each party will draw up a list of candidates which they will publish before the election. Then if a party elects fewer local members than its share of the popular vote, candidates from its list are elected to compensate for the difference.

The labour movement, as well as other progressive organizations, support the idea of changing our voting system to MMP. There are many reasons for this, some of which are the problems inherent in our current system:

- **It encourages voting for what we don't want.** Ontario's (and Canada's) current electoral system is based on the winner-take-all principle. Voters just get to elect one member for their constituency, and their party's candidate either wins or loses. Unfortunately, this kind of system leaves voters in an unfair position: some feel pressured to vote against a party they hate rather than for a party they actually support. They think their preferred party's local candidate isn't likely to win, so they try to prevent a candidate they hate from winning by voting for a candidate they dislike. Many others just stop voting, and voter apathy increases.

- **All votes are not equal.** Under the current system, the value of our votes depends on what party we happen to support in a given election. In the last provincial election, for example, the Liberals gained an average of one seat in the Legislature for every 29,000 votes cast for their party. By contrast, the NDP won only one seat for every 94,000 votes cast for them. In other words, the votes of Liberal supporters counted for over three times as much as NDP supporters.
- **It produces phony majorities.** When the voting system doesn't treat all votes equally, election results are distorted. From 1980 to 2003, Canadians had 64 provincial elections, with 37 (or 58%) producing phony majority governments, in which a party that failed to capture a majority of the popular vote was able to gain a solid majority of seats and 100 percent of the legislative power. In other words, in six out of ten provincial elections over the past two and a half decades, a minority was empowered to rule as if it was a majority.
- **It provides extremely poor equity representation.** Research from around the world shows that first-past-the-post systems like ours perform the worst of all electoral systems in electing women, averaging out at about 18% (Canada's is 21%). Mixed-member systems, on the other hand, perform the best, averaging out at about 30%, followed closely by list proportional systems at about 26%.

MMP will provide stronger representation and greater fairness. Parties will end up with a number of seats at Queen's Park in the same proportion as the popular vote they received, no more, no less. Voters will still be able to choose their local representative. If your preferred party's candidate loses in your riding, you can still vote for your party's "list" candidates. And MMP will promote equal representation in the Legislature for women and minorities.

International experience bears this out. The major MMP jurisdictions comparable to us – Germany, New Zealand, Scotland and Wales – have between 31 percent and 50 percent women in their legislatures. The major comparable countries with our outdated first past-the-post system – the US and the UK – have 16 percent and 20 percent women.

Other under-represented groups will similarly fare better. For example, after switching to MMP in the 1990s, New Zealand saw the proportion of Maori in their parliament go from four percent to 16 percent, about their proportion of the population.

Ask your Local Candidates:

Do you support the Citizens' Assembly recommendation to replace our current First-Past-The-Post voting system with a Mixed-Member-Proportional (MMP) system?