

Committee on Institutions

Proceedings Initiated by Committee

The Reform of the Voting System in Québec
(abridged version)

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General information on the parliamentary committee consultation process is available at <http://www.assnat.qc.ca/eng/publications/participation/consulta.html>

The Committee will begin holding public hearings on November 29, 2002. To participate in consultations, you must make a submission to the Committee on Institutions. Submissions must be sent in 25 letter-size copies accompanied by the same number of summaries of their contents. If you would like your submission to be distributed to the Press Gallery, you must send an additional 25 copies. Submissions must be received by the Committees Secretariat no later than November 21, 2002. The Committee will select individuals and organizations to hear from among those having sent submissions.

You may also express your opinions by completing the reply form available on the National Assembly Website at <http://www.assnat.qc.ca> and returning it by fax to (418) 643-0248 or by email to the address of the Committees Secretariat.

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INTRODUCTION

On December 19, 2001, the Committee on Institutions, one of ten National Assembly parliamentary standing committees, undertook proceedings initiated by committee to study voting system reform. The Committee's mandate is as follows: "To evaluate Québec's current voting system, to study various avenues for voting system reform, and to measure their impact on representation, particularly in the outlying regions, as well as on the role and operation of parliamentary institutions, government formation and stability, and Québec's political system in general."

Since the November 30, 1998 election, Québec's *first-past-the-post voting system* has again come under fire from citizens who believe it does not accurately reflect voter preferences in the distribution of seats in the National Assembly. In 1998, the party that formed the government did not receive the largest share of the popular vote, whereas the party that did ended up in the opposition. This is the third time in the history of Québec that the most popular party has been unable to form the government, the other examples being 1944 and 1966. In some cases, the first-past-the-post system has also generated disproportionate majorities for the parties in power, while depriving small or new parties of representation corresponding to their actual level of popular support. Many people therefore consider this voting system unjust with regard to voters' true choices.

The Committee is now calling on all parties to collectively reflect on the system used to select the representatives who sit in the National Assembly. The voting system is used to designate these representatives. The 125 members who currently make up the National Assembly play three key roles in our democracy. First, members are *intermediaries* between voters and the government. Next, as *legislators*, members examine, analyze, and vote on bills in the National Assembly. In addition, members can question the government's actions in a variety of ways, thereby providing essential *checks and balances*, particularly by making sure that taxpayer money is spent properly.

The Committee wants the public to express its opinions on Québec's current voting system and, if reform proves warranted, to speak on the various options.

There are essentially two main families of voting systems: plurality-majority systems and proportional systems.

Our democracy currently operates according to a *plurality-majority* system based on a simple principle: the candidate obtaining the most votes in a constituency is declared elected, and the party winning the most seats forms the government. Ministers are chosen from among representatives of the winning party.

The other large family is *proportional representation (PR)*. Proportional systems are designed to attribute parties a share of seats more or less equivalent to the percentage of the popular vote they obtain in a given territory during an election. In addition, certain countries use *mixed systems* that combine the purported advantages of both systems (the plurality-majority system and PR).

These two main models are based on different conceptions of democracy. The primary objective of the plurality-majority system is to elect a stable, effective government, while PR places the priority on the fairest possible representation of voters' choices in the National Assembly. The challenge boils down to one key question: Should priority be given to *governance* or to the *representativity of parliament* (the National Assembly)?

This is an indispensable opportunity for both voters and parliamentarians to explore the various systems that could be used to elect representatives to the National Assembly and make recommendations as to the direction in which they believe our electoral system should be taken. The members of the Committee on Institutions, after voting unanimously to adopt this discussion paper, thus invite any interested individuals or organizations to present their opinions at the general consultations. Parliamentarians will study the issue from all angles, taking nothing for granted and welcoming all suggestions. Upon completion of the hearings held throughout Québec, the Committee will submit a report on its observations and recommendations.

At the end of this document is a description of the main plurality-majority, proportional, and mixed voting systems. Anyone who would like more information about voting systems and the challenges of reform is invited to consult the discussion paper available on the National Assembly Website.

QUÉBEC'S CURRENT VOTING SYSTEM

The current voting system is easy for electors to understand and easy to administer. To vote, one simply selects a candidate from among those listed on the ballot. Next, the winners are quickly determined, simply by counting the votes for each candidate and compiling the results on election night. Voters can also clearly identify who will form the government as soon as the winning party is announced.

The fact that there is only one elected member per constituency makes it easy for voters to know who represents their “district.” Members can then act as spokespersons in the Assembly on behalf of a district, locality, or region, as well as intermediaries between the citizens of their constituency and government administration. However, some believe this idea of a close link between voters, their constituency, and their elected member is an illusion, at least in Montréal and Québec City, where living on one side of the street or the other can change a person’s constituency, after periodic redistribution of the electoral map. Some also wonder whether a single person can truly represent all citizens in a constituency, including those who voted for someone else.

But the most frequently cited drawbacks of the plurality-majority system involve its lack of representativity and the distortions it creates. In particular, citizens would like to see a way to ensure fairer representation of natives, the anglophone community, and cultural communities. More generally, the distortions caused by the plurality-majority system still spark the most controversy. One possible distortion is the reversal of results, which can prevent the party with the most popular support from taking power. This was the case in 1998, when the Liberal Party claimed 43.5% of the popular vote and the Parti Québécois won 42.9%. Despite the outcome, the PQ took 76 of 125 Assembly seats and went on to form the government.

In addition, the party that wins a majority of votes often obtains a number of seats that is vastly disproportionate to the number of votes in its favor. A case often cited in Québec is that of the 1973 election, when the liberals took 93% of the seats after receiving only 55% of the vote. Due to the winner’s bonus in seats, the first-past-the-post system also hinders the emergence of small or new parties within the National Assembly. Some people, afraid of “wasting” their vote by supporting a fringe party, feel obliged to vote “strategically” for a party other than the one they prefer.

These distortions matter little to first-past-the-post advocates, who argue that by giving the winning party a clear majority in most cases, plurality-majority elections guarantee strong, lasting, and effective governments. They affirm that the government majority in the Assembly leaves the majority party completely free to govern effectively, since it can develop bills and policies without having to negotiate the approval of one or more other parties. In a plurality-majority system, it is also easy to identify the people behind government policies. At election time, voters can deliver a verdict on how the party in power has administered public affairs by voting for it or another party.

In short, plurality-majority advocates believe that the system's main purpose is to elect a stable, effective government, and consider that the first-past-the-post system fulfils this requirement better than any other system.

PROSPECTS FOR VOTING SYSTEM REFORM IN QUÉBEC

If Quebecers decided to change their voting system, they could retain a single-member plurality-majority system but allow a second round of voting (as in France) or adopt a preferential vote, a formula that allows electors to rank candidates by order of preference. At present, however, the trend seems to favor some form of proportional representation (PR), with Québec's main political parties including the addition of some form of proportional representation component in their respective platforms.

Citizens have a right to ask to what extent adopting a new system for electing representatives to the National Assembly might affect how they vote, how the government operates, and how politics are conducted in general. The impact of a reform would be even greater if the new system were partially or totally proportional. Moreover, there are many variations of these different systems, some more proportional than others, and some giving electors more choices than others.

A first major change is that constituencies would be much larger under a proportional system. Québec's current system is formed of *single-member*

constituencies, each represented by only one elected member. But proportional (or partially proportional) systems require larger constituencies because each is a *multi-member* district represented by a number of MPs. The more seats in a constituency, the greater its representation in the Assembly (even with the current 125 seats). In Ireland, for example, there are between 3 and 5 seats per constituency. In some countries, there are even more—the Netherlands has one large 150 seat district covering the entire territory! But a single constituency for the entire territory has never been considered for Québec. Here talk has instead focused on large regional constituencies.

This would mean that on your ballot, you would have more than one choice to make. For example, if there were 5 seats to fill in your region, you could choose up to 5 candidates on the ballot. In some countries, voters must choose one or more candidates from among those presented by the various political parties, while in others, voters can only mark the name of a party, with the party deciding which candidates will obtain seats.

Regardless of the approach that is adopted, the composition of the National Assembly would better reflect the share of support for each party than under the current system. If the 1998 election were held according to a PR system, the Parti Québécois and the Liberal Party would have won a number of seats closer to the percentage of votes they received (approximately 43% each), and Action démocratique would have won a proportion of seats closer to the 12% of the vote it received.

Furthermore, such a system could prevent the regional polarization of large parties, for example by allowing the Parti Québécois to achieve representation in Western Montréal and the Liberal Party to be better represented in a region like Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean.

A PR system could give smaller parties a better chance of participating in political life by allowing them to elect representatives. One of the concerns of PR critics is party proliferation. But PR systems set a threshold a party must attain to be represented in parliament, in order to prevent certain parties with marginal status or very limited support from being represented. This “passing mark” is generally set at 4 to 5% of the votes cast. The higher the threshold, the harder it is for small parties to obtain seats in parliament.

While setting a threshold can prevent party proliferation when electing a parliament under PR, one must still accept that coalition governments will be frequent under this system. The most popular party must often negotiate with its adversaries to form a coalition government, while in Québec the party winning a majority of seats generally governs alone. PR opponents fear the fragility of government coalitions and the instability they supposedly cause. But PR partisans hold that states electing their assembly under PR are not necessarily governed less effectively. Moreover, they believe that coalition governments have the advantage of being more consensus-based, and that the opposition is generally more constructive because some opposition parties can expect to one day govern alongside government coalition parties.

Mixed systems (such as the formula used in Germany), which allow representatives to be elected in two ways (*plurality-majority* and *proportional*), raise similar concerns. The difference is that part of the the National Assembly would be elected as under the current system, while the other would be elected proportionally. Electors would have two votes: one for a candidate and one for a party. If such a system were chosen, we would have to determine which proportional formula to use to elect “additional” representatives, how to draw their constituency boundaries, where to set the representation threshold, and so on. Furthermore, this system would also make coalition governments more frequent. But a mixed system also assumes that parliament would include two types of members—the constituency representatives we have under the current system and “additional” representatives elected under a proportional system. It is worth asking whether these “proportional” representatives would have a different role to play than the former, as those who are skeptical about this model tend to believe.

SHOULD WE REFORM OUR VOTING SYSTEM

The debate on electoral reform touches on a number of issues. In considering the many factors that must be taken into account in making a choice, we must determine whether voting system reform is necessary and if so, which system best meets the needs of Quebecers.

How should such a decision be reached? Two avenues are open to us: a referendum on the voting system or a vote by members of the National Assembly.

In the meantime, the members of the Committee invite you to participate in this debate, which is crucial to improving democratic life. This consultation will provide both voters and parliamentarians an opportunity to discuss the best way to elect representatives to the National Assembly.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1.1. SHOULD WE REFORM OUR VOTING SYSTEM?

- *THE TIMELINESS OF REFORM AND THE CHOICE OF A VOTING SYSTEM*

Would changing the voting system maintain or improve voter participation?

Would changing the voting system have an impact on how politics is conducted, thereby increasing public confidence in our elected representatives?

What do you expect from a member?

What are the main factors influencing your vote in an election? Please rank the following elements in order, from most (“1”) to least important (“7”):

- *The candidate* ()
- *The party* ()
- *The party leader* ()
- *Ideas and party programs* ()
- *Government performance* ()
- *Premier’s performance* ()
- *Other (specify):* _____ ()

Would you prefer a voting system that results in a parliamentary majority and ensures that the government is formed by a single party, or rather a system that ensures more faithful representation of voter opinion in the National Assembly?

- *REACHING A DECISION*

In the event of reform, when should a new voting system be introduced?

Should a referendum be held to choose the voting system that will be used in Québec?

Would a vote by members of the National Assembly be enough to choose a voting system?

If so, should a 2/3 majority vote be required, as is the case for certain important decisions?

1.2. ASSESSING QUÉBEC'S CURRENT VOTING SYSTEM

- *THE SIMPLICITY OF THE CURRENT VOTING SYSTEM AND QUÉBEC POLITICAL TRADITION*

Do you consider the current first-past-the-post voting system to be a simple one?

If the voting system were modified, would you want the new system to keep certain features of the current system? If so, which ones?

- *THE VOTER-MEMBER LINK*

Do you know the name of your constituency?

Do you know who your member is? Have you ever contacted your member for any reason?

Can a member speak on behalf of voters who supported a party other than his or her own?

- *CONSTITUENCY SIZE AND ELECTORAL BOUNDARIES*

Do you feel a sense of belonging to your constituency?

Which territory do you feel most attached to?

- *Your municipality?*
- *Your constituency?*
- *Your region?*
- *Another territory? Please specify:*

Do you feel that the existing electoral map and voting system benefits certain areas (urban centers like Montréal and Québec City, certain regions, etc.)? If so, which ones?

▪ *GOVERNMENT EFFECTIVENESS AND STABILITY*

In your view, should a voting system result in the formation of a strong and effective government?

Do you think that the current first-past-the-post system is the best way to ensure the formation of a stable and effective government?

▪ *RESPONSIBLE REPRESENTATIVES AND GOVERNMENT*

At election time, is it important for you to know who is responsible for the political decisions that concern you and to be able to express your opinion on their performance by casting your ballot? If so, do you believe that the current system allows you to clearly express your position on the policies of the government in power?

Do you think that the current voting system ensures that government representatives are held accountable for their election promises?

▪ *DISTORTIONS IN REPRESENTATION*

Under the first-past-the-post system, a party can win a majority of seats and form the government without winning a majority of votes. Do you find this acceptable or unacceptable?

The first-past-the-post system favors the party in power in the National Assembly by securing it additional seats at the expense of the opposition party and smaller third parties. Do you find this acceptable or unacceptable?

Under the first-past-the-post system, are voter aspirations reflected in the composition of the National Assembly?

Do you believe that Québec voters suffer from a “democratic deficit?”

- *THIRD PARTIES AND “STRATEGIC VOTING”*

Do you think that the existing system hinders the emergence of new or fringe parties?

Have you ever voted for a different party than the one you supported (or spoiled your ballot) because you felt that the party you preferred had no chance of electing its candidate or forming a government?

- *REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN*

What would be the best way to maintain or increase the number of women members in the National Assembly? Are such measures necessary?

- *REPRESENTATION OF NATIVES AND MINORITIES*

Should steps be taken to ensure the representation of natives and linguistic and cultural minorities in the National Assembly?

1.3. EFFECTS OF A PROPORTIONAL OR MIXED VOTING SYSTEM AND RELATED CONSIDERATIONS

- *ELECTORAL THRESHOLD*

Would you be in favor of imposing an electoral threshold in order to prevent the presence of certain fringe parties in the National Assembly and avoid political fragmentation? If so, should the threshold be low, high, or moderate?

- *THE POSSIBILITY OF HAVING TWO VOTES*

When a general election is held, would you like to be able to cast two separate votes, one for the candidate in your constituency and a second for the party you support (even if it is different from that of your local candidate)?

- *AN OPEN OR CLOSED LIST?*

If your ballot showed lists of candidates from the various parties, would you be inclined to

- *Vote directly for the party and accept the candidates in the order the party presents them?*
- *Vote for the candidates from the same party, but in the order you prefer?*
- *Vote for candidates from any party, according to your preferences?*

- *ELECTORAL BOUNDARIES IN A PROPORTIONAL SYSTEM*

Can Québec be divided into “natural regions” with which citizens identify? If so, is it possible to redraw electoral boundaries in a way that reflects the boundaries of these regions?

If proportional representation were adopted, would it be suitable to create electoral districts corresponding to Québec’s 17 existing administrative regions?

Would there be disadvantages to creating larger districts

- *For the public?*
- *For the elected members?*

- *COALITION GOVERNMENTS*

Would a new voting system change the way governments are formed and the way they govern?

Would a coalition government be less effective and less stable than a government elected under the first-past-the-post system?

Would the opposition be stronger and more effective in a proportional (or mixed) system?

- *METHODS OF CALCULATION*

Does the complexity of the methods used to allocate seats under a proportional or mixed system create an obstacle to the adoption of a new system?

- *TWO TYPES OF MEMBERS?*

In a system that elects both “constituency” representatives and “additional” representatives, would the latter have a different role than the former?

Should “additional” representatives be elected regionally or at a Québec-wide level?

- *DOUBLE CANDIDACY*

If we adopted a mixed system, should candidates have the right to run both locally and on the party list?

- *THE NUMBER OF MEMBERS IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY*

Would you agree to increase the number of members from the present 125 in order to increase the proportionality of the National Assembly? If so, how many additional seats would you like to see added?

- *PARTY REPRESENTATION AT THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY*

Would the major parties benefit from the introduction of a proportional or mixed system?

Would a proportional or mixed system automatically improve small party representation in the National Assembly?

- *THE CHOICE OF A VOTING SYSTEM*

After reflecting on the various options available, how would you like to see your elected representatives chosen?

- *The current first-past-the-post system?*
- *Another winner-take-all system, whether*
 - *A two-round system?*
 - *A system under which candidates are ranked by order of preference to elect a single member per riding, as in the current system?*

- *A system that elects an assembly whose makeup more accurately reflects the percentage of votes obtained by each party, whether:*
 - *A system in which you choose from a list of candidates?*
 - *A system in which you rank candidates by order of preference to elect a number of members in each riding?*
 - *A mixed system under which you could elect members as you do presently and also on a proportional basis?*

- *Another solution?*

APPENDIX: PRINCIPAL VOTING SYSTEMS WORLDWIDE FOR ELECTING REPRESENTATIVES

Plurality-majority systems

The three main plurality-majority voting systems are the *first-past-the-post system*, the *two-round system*, and *preferential voting*.

- *The first-past-the-post system*: This is the voting system used in Québec, the rest of Canada, Great Britain, a number of Commonwealth countries, and the United States. It is known as a first-past-the-post system because the victorious candidate is the one who wins a **plurality** of votes in a **single round of voting**, without necessarily obtaining an absolute majority. In other words, a candidate need not obtain over half the votes to be elected (for this reason, some prefer to call it the *plurality* system, since a plurality of votes is enough to be elected). It is a **single-member** system because there is only one member elected per constituency. Under this system, the winner in each district is simply the candidate who obtains the most votes. The party that elects the most candidates forms the government, whereas the second-place party becomes the official opposition. The winning party benefits from a seat “bonus,” and the system often causes distortion between the percentage of votes and the number of seats obtained by the various parties. In fact, the first-past-the-post system aims less to faithfully represent voter opinion in parliament than to establish a parliamentary majority by ensuring that a single party forms the government.
- *The two-round system*: France also uses a single-member, plurality-majority system, but with a second round of voting. Two-round systems initially operate much like ours. However, to be elected in the first round, candidates must obtain an absolute majority of the votes cast. In electoral districts where this is the case, there is no second round. Otherwise, a second vote is held to decide between either the two top-finishing candidates or the candidates who received a certain percentage of first-round votes.
- *Preferential voting*: Single-member preferential voting systems are designed to elect representatives with an absolute majority (50% + 1). Preferential ballots are very similar to those used in our system, except that voters must rank candidates by order of preference (1 to 5, for example, if there are five people running) instead of marking an “x” by a single name. After the votes are counted, the candidate obtaining 50% + 1 of the vote is declared elected. If none of the candidates win an absolute majority, the one who received the fewest first choice votes is eliminated. The second choice votes from that candidate’s ballots are reallocated to the other candidates. This process continues until one of the candidates attains the required minimum. This voting system is used in Australia and has been used in Western Canada. Preferential voting has the advantage of offering voters more choice than in a first-past-the-post system. Voters can also count on the fact that candidates were elected by more than half the

voters. In addition, because small parties and independent candidates have a better chance of winning support, they are more inclined to seek election.

Proportional representation (PR)

The two main types of PR are the *list system* and the *single transferable vote*.

- *The list system:* List PR systems exist in many European countries. List systems require larger electoral districts than first-past-the-post systems, since each constituency is represented by several members. Each political party runs a list of candidates for the seats to be filled. Voters choose from the lists, marking their ballots with the party of their choice. Parties are allocated seats in proportion to their share of the vote. Seats are distributed using a calculation method that allows parties to receive a number of seats more or less equal to their share of the vote. The two main types of lists are the closed list (which voters must accept as is, choosing the list as presented by the party without being able to indicate a preference for a given candidate) and the open list (voters can vote for a specific candidate on a party list, giving them the opportunity to determine which candidates will be elected). In some countries, voters can choose candidates from more than one party list, a system known as panachage or cross-party voting. Lists may be regional (as in Belgium, Finland, and Sweden) or national (as in the Netherlands and Israel). In the latter case, a single electoral district encompasses the entire country (a pure PR system).
- *The single transferable vote (STV)* is used in Ireland, Australia (Senate elections), and Malta, all countries with a British parliamentary heritage. It is also the only proportional formula ever employed in Canada, where it was used in urban ridings in Manitoba and Alberta. STV allows each voter to support a given candidate and produces fairer results than the current first-past-the-post system. In multi-member electoral districts (three to five seats in Ireland), voters select their preferred candidate by writing a “1” beside the name on the ballot. They can also rank subsequent candidates on the ballot (“2,” “3,” etc., up to the number of seats to be filled), as in preferential voting. Seats are then attributed using a method specific to STV.

Mixed systems

The purpose of mixed systems is to fully or partially compensate parties disadvantaged by the distortions of the plurality-majority system.

The compensatory proportional system combines a proportional (list PR) and a first-past-the-post component, with members being elected by both methods. The vote itself is mixed, because each voter has two distinct votes, one for a constituency representative and the other for a party list. The prototype of this system is the one used in Germany. There, election results are just as proportional as under a list PR system. In the German Bundestag, 50% of the members

are elected by plurality-majority vote and 50% by PR. New Zealand adopted a similar system in 1993, but with different proportions. Since 1998, Scotland and Wales have also used a mixed system. In 1994, Italy adopted a mixed-member system in which 75% of seats are reserved for single-member districts, whereas 25% are allocated on a PR basis.