

## HOW MUCH DOES EACH VOTE COUNT? Introduction to Proportional Representation



**NOTE TO TEACHER:** This lesson plan can be used alone or in conjunction with ETFO's curriculum document, *You Choose*, available at <http://www.etfo.net/redirects/yc.htm>

### OVERVIEW:

Across Canada, people are asking whether our “first-past-the-post” electoral system best represents voters. Under our current system, each riding elects one member of the legislature. The candidate with the most votes in the election wins.

For years commentators have argued that any system that determines seats based solely on plurality vote (whoever gets the most votes, wins) undermines democracy. They argue that under a plurality system, people can be elected with support from only a minority of voters. Indeed, governments in many provinces and in Ottawa are elected without majority support.

Further, they argue that there is little incentive for people to vote if they feel their votes don't count.

Instead, they argue, we should elect governments through proportional representation (PR). Proportional

representation is a system under which the distribution of seats in a legislature is determined by the proportion of the vote any party receives. Under PR individual party preferences of voters are more fairly represented in the legislature. Each person's vote can influence the outcome and therefore, the argument goes, there will be more voter participation in election campaigns.

Within this climate of discussion, governments have come under pressure to implement electoral systems that more accurately reflect voter intention. These governments have made commitments to ask voters about their preferences for electoral system change. Various changes have been proposed. Several combine aspects of the plurality system/one member-one district system with proportional representation.

## Ontario

In Ontario the government has established the Citizens' Assembly to give "citizens a direct voice in determining the options we have when we vote and how our votes are translated into seats for Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs)." ([www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca](http://www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca))

The assembly is holding hearings now across the province and will be making its recommendation to the government in May. If the assembly recommends a change to Ontario's voting system, a referendum on the recommendation will be held with the provincial election in October 2007. If at least 60 percent of voters overall and more than 50 percent of voters in at least half the ridings approve, Ontario's first-past-the-post, single electoral district system will change.

For this reason, now is a good time for Junior and Intermediate students to understand and consider the differences between our plurality system of election and proportional representation.

This curriculum resource is designed to help you, the teacher, direct that consideration.



## Citizens' Assembly On Electoral Reform

The Assembly is independent of government. It is made up of 103 randomly selected citizens – one from each of Ontario's electoral districts. With the Chair, 52 of the members are male and 52 are female. At least one member is Aboriginal.

Together, Assembly members will examine Ontario's electoral system – the system that structures how votes get combined to elect Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs).

The Assembly's work will be led and facilitated by George Thomson, an educator and former judge and deputy minister, who was appointed by the government.

Members of the Assembly were selected at random by Elections Ontario from the Permanent Register of Electors for Ontario. Every registered voter was eligible to participate, with a few exceptions, such as elected officials.

Beginning in September 2006, members of the Assembly will meet about twice a month for eight months.

Together, they'll examine our current electoral system and learn about other systems. Then, they'll consult with the public through meetings and written submissions. And then, depending on what they learn and hear, they'll recommend either keeping our current electoral system or adopting a new one.

That recommendation will be outlined in a report due by May 15, 2007. If the Assembly recommends making a change to Ontario's current electoral system, the government will put the question to voters in a province-wide referendum by October 2007.

(Adapted from: [citizensassembly.gov.on.ca](http://citizensassembly.gov.on.ca))

Other provinces have also undertaken reviews of their electoral systems.

### **British Columbia**

In British Columbia the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform recommended the adoption of a new voting system – the single transferable vote (STV). In the referendum on the question, held in May 2005, 57.69 percent supported the change (less than 60 percent of the voters required for adoption). Premier Campbell promised to put the question to the public again in November 2008.

### **Prince Edward Island**

Prince Edward Island established a commission – the Commission on PEI's Electoral Future. On November 28, 2005 the Prince Edward Island government held a plebiscite on the voting system recommended by that commission – mixed member proportional (MMP). A majority of voters (63.58%) rejected the recommended change.

### **New Brunswick**

New Brunswick too established a commission – the Commission on Legislative Democracy. This commission is recommending a mixed member proportional (MMP) system for New Brunswick. Bernard Lord, premier at the time, announced that New Brunswick would hold a referendum on the recommendation in 2008 in conjunction with the municipal elections. To pass, Lord indicated that more than 50 percent of voters must approve and the turnout of voters must exceed fifty percent.

### **NOTE TO GRADE SIX TEACHERS:**

You can use this material to compare Canada with other countries and encourage your students to learn about the electoral systems around the world.

Canada and the Canadian provinces are among the few jurisdictions in the world that use a “first-past-the-post” electoral system. The only other major Western democracies using this system are the United States and Britain. Most other countries use some form of proportional representation.

Below is only one example of the electoral system in another country. For more information about other countries, students can search the countries individually or visit <http://www.ipu.org/>.

## **Australia**

Australia has both state and national elections. The electoral systems vary among the states, but in all voting is mandatory. The federal parliament in Australia is elected using preferential voting – voters rank candidates and the rankings are all considered. To win a candidate must receive more than 50 percent of the votes cast. The Senate is elected using a form of proportional representation called Single Transferable Vote. This is the system that the BC Citizens' Assembly recommended.

### **PURPOSE:**

To understand the impact on election results of our current electoral system and the impact of one that is based on proportional representation.

### **BACKGROUND:**

Under the current electoral system, MPs and MPPs – and therefore governments, federally and provincially – can be elected with less than a majority of votes. Where there are three or more candidates running in an election (almost all federal and provincial constituencies) a candidate may be elected with as little as 34 percent of the vote.

At the same time the current voting system under-represents parties that may have a substantial popular vote. (An opposition or third party will have many fewer seats in the legislature than the portion of the total vote it received, and the government party will have many more seats than the proportion of the total vote it received.)

**NOTE:** The focus of this lesson is on Ontario and the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. It is important, however, that students understand that the same electoral system exists federally and determines the make-up of the House of Commons.

### **CURRICULUM EXPECTATIONS:**

#### **Social Studies**

*Overall (Grade 5):* Identify and describe the electoral process

- Specific: Construct and read a wide variety of graphs, charts, and models for specific purposes (Grades 5, 6, 7, 8).
- Specific: Communicate information (e.g. comparing Ontario's and Canada's form of government to forms of government found in other countries).

#### **Math**

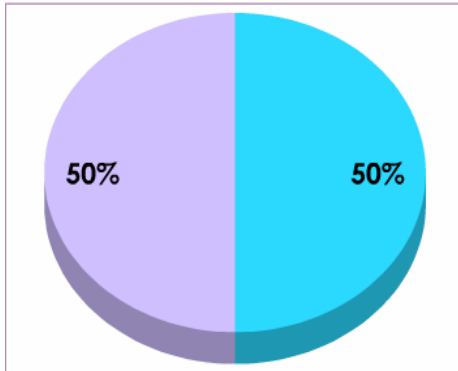
*Overall (Grades 5, 6, 7, 8):* Interpret displays of data and present the information using mathematical terms.

*Overall (Grades 6, 7, 8):* Evaluate data and draw conclusions from the analysis of data.

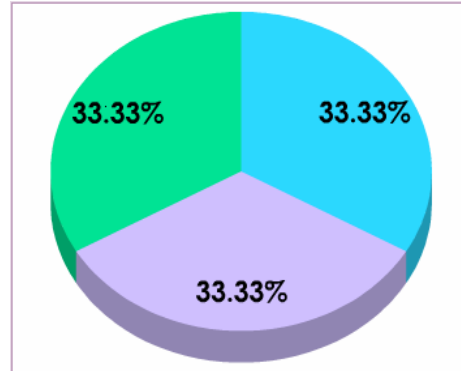
### MATERIALS:

- Recent election results for both local constituency or riding and overall results by party are available provincially at [www.electionsontario.on.ca](http://www.electionsontario.on.ca).
- Fraction circles:

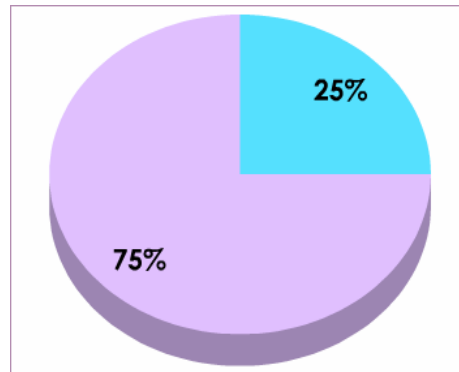
**ONE HALF**



**ONE THIRD**



**ONE QUARTER OR THREE QUARTERS**



### LESSON OUTLINE:

1. Review percentages using circles to ensure that students understand how one half (50%), one third (33.33%), one quarter (25%) and three quarters (75%) are represented in a circle graph.
2. Ask students to indicate – using two hand drawn circles representing all the votes cast in the election – what fraction of the vote they believe the candidate that won received (or what fraction of all the votes cast across the country, the party that formed the government received.)

3. Many students will believe that winning the election means that a majority (over 50%) of voters cast a vote for the winning candidate or for the party that formed the federal government. This is because in most contests that they are familiar with, where counting is involved (or a score is received) there are two teams and one receives more votes than another. They also associate success with a passing grade of over 50 percent. They may never have considered that a governing party may have many fewer supporters than all the electors that voted against them.

**TEACHER NOTES:**

Teachers may want to demonstrate this concept by presenting this scenario:

- A) The class should stay in for recess.
  - B) The class should go out for recess.
  - C) The class should get their recess as an early dismissal.
- In a class of 20, how many combinations of votes could decide that (B) will win? (Solicit guesses, but don't allow discussion or explanations until a good number of combinations have been contributed.)
  - How will the class feel if the group that won the decision were to make all the decisions for the class?

4. Have students create a pie or circle graph using the results of their local riding or of the total votes cast for each party across the country. Students will be surprised to learn that an MPP can be - and usually is - elected with a lower percentage of the vote.
5. Then have students create a similar pie or circle graph with the results of the most recent provincial or national election. Governments in Ontario – even majority governments – can also be elected with a little more than a third of the vote.
6. What if parties were allocated seats in the Ontario Legislature based on their percentage of the total vote? Treat the pie or circle graph as the total number of seats in Ontario. How many seats would each party receive if they were allocated the same portion of seats as the portion of votes they received?
7. Ask students which system would work better and why.

### **ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES:**

Students will be assessed on their ability to use data and represent it in a graph, their understanding of proportional representation, as well as their ability to communicate their understandings clearly and concisely.

### **MODIFICATIONS AND ADAPTATIONS:**

- Students who have not used a pie or circle graph before may need to see examples of this kind of graph.
- It may also be useful to graph the local constituency data as a large group.

### **EXTENSIONS:**

- Have students debate the question: Should Ontario change its voting system?
- Have students research other systems of government (For grade 6 that may involve European countries that are trading partners) that use proportional representation. How do these systems work?
- Use computer graphing programs to create graphs to display the results in other local ridings, or in one riding over a period of elections.

### **RESOURCES:**

Provincial election results can be found at [www.electionsontario.on.ca](http://www.electionsontario.on.ca). Choose 'Past Elections' for previous election results.

Information about the Citizens' Assembly can be found at [www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca](http://www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca).

Information about the issues around our present electoral system and about proportional representation can be found at [www.fairvotecanada.org](http://www.fairvotecanada.org).

### **HOME CONNECTIONS:**

- Adult Interview: Ask students to ask an adult family member if they usually vote for the candidate they think is the best, or the party they think is the best?
- Ask students to watch for newspaper stories about the Citizens' Assembly and bring them to the class.