



Principles and Characteristics of Electoral Systems

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PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER

The purpose of this paper is to promote dialogue among Citizens' Assembly members and other Ontarians on the principles we value in an electoral system. It is intended to get us thinking about questions like:

- What do we want our electoral system to achieve?
- What do we want our system to avoid?
- What choices do we want when we vote?

The Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform was created by a regulation under Ontario's *Election Act*. The regulation directs the Assembly to consider eight principles and characteristics to assess our current electoral system and other systems. This paper briefly discusses these eight principles:

- Legitimacy
- Fairness of representation
- Voter choice
- Effective parties
- Stable and effective government
- Effective parliament
- Stronger voter participation
- Accountability

The regulation also allows the Assembly to consider any other principles or characteristics it believes are important. The Citizens' Assembly has also identified two other features of an electoral system that should be considered. These are:

- Simplicity and practicality

Need background information?

If you would like background information on the Citizens' Assembly and electoral systems, visit our website at www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca, send an e-mail to info@citizensassembly.gov.on.ca, or call the Citizens' Assembly Secretariat at 416-325-0758, or toll free at 1-866-317-3208.

For an introduction to Ontario's parliamentary system of government, you may wish to read "[Ontario Politics and Government: A Brief Overview](#)" from The Legislative Library of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. It is available on our website or by calling the Secretariat.

ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

What is an electoral system?

In Ontario, our representatives—Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs)—hold seats in the legislature at Queen’s Park. An electoral system determines how these seats are filled when our votes are counted at election time.

Electoral system = Our votes → Seats in the legislature

All electoral systems have three basic elements:

- the number of representatives elected in each electoral district (riding)
- the electoral formula or rules for determining who wins the seat or seats
- the type of ballot.

Deciding what’s important to us

Many electoral systems are used around the world. Each works in a different way and produces different results. The Citizens’ Assembly mandate is to assess Ontario’s current electoral system and other systems. To do this, we can start by identifying a set of principles that we value, and then we can decide which system is most likely to reflect them. It’s a bit like buying a car. Before you head to the dealership, you think about what features are most important to you: size, safety, fuel efficiency, cost, and so on.

Electoral systems involve trade-offs

It would be difficult for any one electoral system to reflect all of the principles fully or even to the same degree. Electoral system experts often say that choosing an electoral system involves trade-offs, or give and take, between a number of desirable principles and objectives. In other words, emphasizing one principle may mean de-emphasizing another one.

Limits to what electoral systems can do

As important as electoral systems are, there are limits to what any system, by itself, can accomplish. Many other factors, such as the quality of political leadership, the nomination process for candidates, and the rules of the legislature, influence how well the principles people value will be reflected.

To take but one example: stronger voter participation. The electoral system may influence voter turnout, but there are many reasons why people don’t vote. And some of these reasons may have little if any connection to the electoral system.

PRINCIPLES & CHARACTERISTICS

The eight principles in the Citizens' Assembly regulation were recommended by a committee—the former Select Committee on Electoral Reform—set up by the Ontario legislature to study electoral systems. The committee was made up of MPPs from the Liberal, Progressive Conservative and New Democratic parties.

The committee did research on electoral systems, consulted with experts, and travelled to British Columbia and Europe to learn firsthand about their experiences with electoral reform. The committee gave its report to the legislature in November 2005. Each of the eight principles is discussed below:

- First, what the regulation says about the principle is quoted.
- Then, there is a brief description of the principle's characteristics, or features, taken from the former Select Committee's report and other sources.
- Finally, for each principle, there are one or two questions to think about; no doubt you will have others. These questions are intended to encourage Assembly members and interested members of the public to think about and discuss what principles they value most.

Legitimacy

“The electoral system should have the confidence of Ontarians and reflect their values.”

An electoral system must inspire confidence in both its process and its results. Even if you're not happy with the outcome of an election, you can accept it as legitimate if the electoral system is based on principles that most people value. To use a sports analogy, when your team loses, it's easier to accept the result if you believe the rules of the game were fair.

Legitimacy is difficult to measure, but one possible test is the level of public participation in the electoral system. Participation includes activities such as voting, supporting or joining political parties, and taking an interest in election campaigns. It makes sense that people are more likely to participate in an electoral system if they have confidence in it.

In effect, legitimacy is the result or consequence of a good electoral system. If a system reflects many of the remaining principles, it is bound to be legitimate.

Questions to think about:

- *What factors make an electoral system legitimate?*
- *What gives you confidence in an electoral system?*

Fairness of representation

“The Legislative Assembly should reflect the population of Ontario in accordance with demographic representation, proportionality and representation by population among other factors.”

There are various ways to think about fairness of representation. The Citizens’ Assembly regulation suggests three: demographic representation, proportionality, and representation by population.

Demographic representation means that the members of the legislature reflect the makeup of the province’s population: for example, in terms of gender, age, ethno-cultural identity and class. The electoral system alone can’t make the legislature representative of the people of Ontario, but it can have some influence. For example, the system can provide more or fewer opportunities for political parties that are committed to running a diverse group of candidates.

Proportionality is achieved when the proportion or share of seats that a party wins is roughly equal to the proportion of votes that it receives in the election. So, for example, in a proportional representation system, if one party wins 40% of the votes in an election, it would win approximately 40% of the seats in the legislature. Likewise, if another party wins 10% of the votes, it would win 10% of the seats.

Representation by population requires that each vote carry an equal weight in electing representatives to the legislature. In other words, each member of the legislature represents roughly the same number of people.

Questions to think about:

- *How important is demographic representation to you?*
- *Should a party’s share of seats in the legislature reflect its share of the vote?*

Voter choice

“An electoral system should promote voter choice in terms of quantity and quality of options available to voters.”

Quantity of choice and quality of choice are both important features of an electoral system.

Quantity refers to the range of choices voters have on the ballot. In some electoral systems, voters choose only a candidate. In others, voters can vote directly for a political party. Some systems allow voters to make only one choice among candidates or parties; others allow or require voters to rank their preferences (first, second, third, etc.).

Quality of choice means that you feel that you have a meaningful choice to make when you vote. In other words, you have the opportunity to select from among candidates or parties who represent genuinely different approaches to governing the province.

Questions to think about:

- *Do you feel that you have enough candidates to choose from when you vote?*
- *When you vote, would you like to choose a local candidate, a party, or both?*
- *Do you feel that you have a meaningful choice of political platforms or policies when you vote?*

Effective parties

“Political parties should be able to structure public debate, mobilize and engage the electorate, and develop policy alternatives.”

Political parties play an essential role in democracies. They attract members who share similar beliefs and develop policies that reflect their goals and priorities. Parties also promote public debate on important issues. Whether you think parties are effective depends on what you think they should do and how you think they should do it.

Electoral systems affect the number of parties that are likely to win seats in the legislature. In some systems only major parties tend to win seats. In others, small parties can obtain some representation. Some systems make it easier for parties to succeed if their support is distributed over the whole province or country. Others favour parties with support concentrated in a specific region.

How effective parties are also depends on factors outside the electoral system, such as election campaign and party financing rules.

Questions to think about:

- *Is there an ideal number of parties?*
- *What are the benefits or drawbacks of accommodating new parties? Smaller parties? Regional parties?*

Stable and effective government

“The electoral system should contribute to continuity of government, and governments should be able to develop and implement their agendas and take decisive action when required.”

An effective government can manage the affairs of the province and carry out the policy platform that the party (or parties) set out during the election campaign. A government is also effective if it can make decisions and take action quickly when needed, for example, to deal with emergencies or challenging situations where it is hard to reach an agreement.

Different electoral systems tend to produce different kinds of governments. Canadians often associate stability with single-party majority governments, where one party has a majority (50% plus 1) of seats in the legislature. Other major democracies, such as France and Germany, have experience with stable coalition governments, where two or more parties govern together and usually have a majority of seats between them.

There are many elements besides the electoral system that contribute to stable and effective governments. These include the quality of leadership and, in minority or coalition governments, the success of negotiation and compromise.

Questions to think about:

- *What are the benefits or drawbacks of majority governments? Of minority or coalition governments?*
- *Is one type of government, by nature, more stable and effective than others?*

Effective parliament

“The Legislative Assembly should include a government and opposition, and should be able to perform its parliamentary functions successfully.”

The Legislative Assembly (Ontario’s legislature) passes laws, authorizes spending, and debates many important public policy issues. Discussions can involve argument or agreement, depending on the relationship between the government and the opposition, and the nature of the issues.

An effective legislature has an effective government and an effective opposition. The opposition parties—those with seats in the legislature who aren’t part of the government—must be able to watch the government closely and present alternatives to the government’s positions. Question Period is the opposition’s opportunity to ask the Premier and government Ministers questions about their policies and hold them accountable. It is a critical part of parliamentary democracy.

Electoral systems are primarily responsible for determining how parties make up the legislature—which parties win seats and how many they win. This, in turn, can influence how the legislature functions. Our system in Canada typically produces single-party majority governments and less frequently, minority governments. For example, the most recent federal election on January 23, 2006 produced a minority Conservative government. In many other major democracies, minority or coalition governments are the norm.

Other factors, not directly connected to the electoral system, also affect the workings of the legislature. These include the rules of the legislature, party discipline (the party’s influence on how its members vote), and the role of Backbenchers—MPPs on the government side who are not Ministers and members on the opposition side who are not party leaders.

Questions to think about:

- *What do you think makes a legislature effective?*
- *Would the effectiveness of the legislature change if fewer or more parties were represented?*

Stronger voter participation

“Ontario’s electoral system should promote voter participation as well as engagement with the broader democratic process.”

People have many different reasons for voting or not voting. It’s important to ask whether some of these reasons relate to how they feel about the electoral system and the way it translates their votes into seats. People may be more likely to vote, or participate more generally in the political process, if they:

- have confidence in the electoral system
- believe their vote will make a difference
- feel the government cares about their concerns
- believe that important issues are at stake
- feel that voting is an important part of being involved in civic or public life generally.

Political parties can play an important role in getting people to vote. How well parties do this job may depend, in part, on what incentives the electoral system gives them. For example, in some systems, parties are motivated to campaign for every available vote. In other systems, parties tend to campaign strategically, focusing their efforts on the electoral districts they are most likely to win.

Questions to think about:

- *What would encourage all segments of the electorate, including young people, to vote?*

Accountability

“Ontario voters should be able to identify decision-makers and hold them to account.”

Different electoral systems produce different types of governments. Governments can be made up of one party that is accountable for decisions or two or more parties that share accountability. A single-party majority or minority government has one party responsible for its decisions. A coalition government has two (or sometimes more) parties that make decisions together.

The lines of accountability are different depending on whether the electoral system allows voters to vote for a local candidate, a party, or both. Voters can try to hold governments accountable with their votes, but this is not always straightforward. For example, in electoral systems where voters choose a local candidate only, they may like a candidate but not his or her party. In systems where voters vote for a party, they may support the party but not the party’s choice of candidates.

One way our system holds the government accountable is by requiring it to have the confidence or support of the legislature. When the legislature loses confidence in a minority government, it can try to defeat it with a motion of non-confidence. This happened at the federal level in November 2005 when the Conservatives, New Democrats and Bloc Québécois united to defeat the Liberal minority government. Parliament was dissolved and an election was called.

Voting is not the only means of holding governments to account. For example, the opposition in the legislature and the media also play important roles, especially between elections.

Questions to think about:

- *Whom do you hold accountable for government decisions? Individual MPPs? The Premier and Cabinet Ministers? The party in power? The legislature as a whole?*
- *Do you think that one type of government (majority, minority, or coalition) is, by nature, more accountable?*

Simplicity and practicality

The Citizen's Assembly has also identified simplicity and practicality as principles that should be considered in assessing electoral systems. It believes the system should be understandable to the public. Simplicity may include how easy it is for voters to use the ballot and to understand the election results. Practicality involves looking at the feasibility of adopting a new system in Ontario.

Questions to think about:

- *Is there a trade-off between having the system simple and practical and achieving other principles?*

THINKING ABOUT THESE PRINCIPLES

The Citizens' Assembly is considering these principles and may identify others that they believe are important.

In the public consultation phase (November 2006 to January 2007), all Ontarians have a chance to share their views with the Assembly on what principles they value most.

Visit the Citizens' Assembly website at www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca for additional learning materials and information on how to participate in the consultation.