# Elections: Process & Performance

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# Acknowledgements

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This project was a collaboration between the author and the team in the OER Design Studio at Fanshawe. The following staff and students were involved in the creation of this project:

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- Koen Liddiard, *Graphic Design*
- Shauna Roch, *Project Lead*
- Wilson Poulter, *Copyright*

# About This Book

This book explores the essential components, processes, and principles that shape modern elections. Divided into three parts, the book begins with a foundational look at the core elements of elections—electoral districts, ballots, voters, and electoral systems. It then examines the election process, from administration and casting votes to vote counting and result reporting. The final section focuses on the performance of elections, addressing outcomes, citizen satisfaction, and the importance of electoral integrity and public trust.

Through accessible explanations and real-world context, this resource helps readers understand how elections are structured, conducted, and evaluated in democratic systems. Ideal for students, educators, and anyone interested in how elections work and why they matter.

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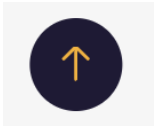

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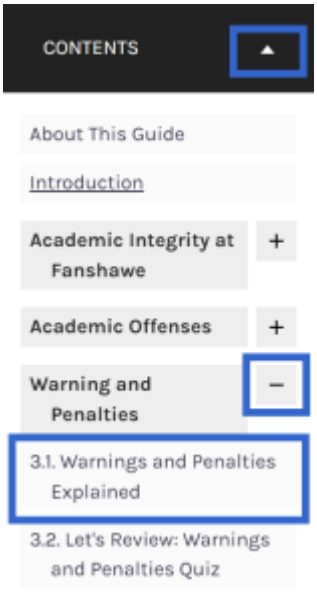


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# INTRODUCTION

Elections are complicated. Around the world, people vote for presidents, prime ministers, judges, senators, parliamentarians, commissioners, reeves, mayors, and, on occasion, dog catchers. Some elections require multiple rounds of voting, and others, such as India, require weeks to cast and count ballots. Despite the apparent complexity, elections are everywhere. In many ways, voting reflects a fundamental part of social organization. People vote for anything and everything: choosing a restaurant for dinner, selecting a league MVP, choosing a best picture, determining who will chair a committee, and crowning champions of TV shows like Dancing With the Stars. Voting is often a default for decision-making.

In 2024, over half of the world's population participated in some type of election (Johnson, 2023). Some of those elections chose new national leaders who will have far-reaching consequences for both domestic and international audiences. Others were equally consequential but far less participatory. Authoritarian regimes like Russia conduct sham elections where the outcome is predetermined. Many incumbents were defeated, while some were reelected. Others, still, appeared to lose an election only to remain in power through the threat or exercise of military power. This resource will attempt to lend some clarity to the complex world of elections.

### Understanding Political Science

This is a Political Science resource, but there is no expectation that readers already possess an in-depth understanding of the subject matter. An Advanced Political Science education is not required. At a minimum, it helps to have a familiarity with civics and a basic grasp of how governments work. Throughout this resource, concepts will be explained and terms will be defined in a manner that aims to enhance your understanding of elections. Consequently, before we jump into our exploration of elections, this section will provide a brief overview of some important terms that will appear throughout the book.

## Politics

Political science is simply the study of politics, but what is politics? It's a term we hear often, and there are different ways of understanding its meaning. One classic definition of politics comes from Political Scientist Harold Lasswell, who defines politics as "who gets what, when, and how" (Lasswell, 1950). Another definition from Mike Munger (2015) describes politics as a system of choosing in groups, where two criteria are met: 1)

everyone agrees on the rules, and 2) people agree to abide by the result. Both definitions capture the essence of politics: it is a process for making collective decisions in groups.

## Voting in Different Political Systems

Voting is a common mechanism for making decisions in groups. In a democracy, the political system is organized around the principle of mass participation – the idea that 'the people' have some kind of input in determining the outcome. In democratic political systems, political parties and candidates are free to compete for power and convince the public that their vision for governing is preferable. In this system, the people will elect the rulers who, ostensibly, rule in the interests of the people. Elections happen at regular intervals to ensure that leaders are held accountable for their actions. Ineffective rulers can be voted out, while competent leaders can be reelected.

Conversely, a dictatorship is characterized by a ruler or group that does not abide by the will of the people. Rather, a leader or party may rule – often by force – without any mechanism of democratic accountability. Political parties may be illegal, and opposition candidates might be jailed for speaking against the government.

## Studying Elections

Ultimately, this resource is about elections. "An election is a formal decision-making process in which groups determine which individuals will hold public office" (Rom et al., 2022, para. 1). While the definition seems simple enough, there are a number of important decisions that precede the administration of an election:

- Who can vote?
- How many candidates are there?
- When does voting happen?
- Who counts the votes?
- How is the winner determined?

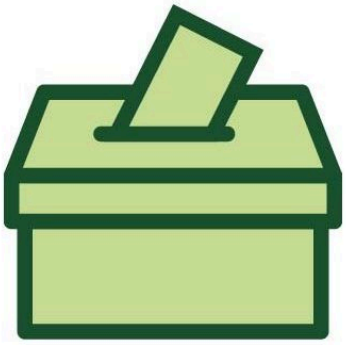
Those are just a few of the questions that will be addressed in this book.

## Organization of the Book

The goal of this text is to help clarify the complex world of elections. Different systems will be compared with the hope of helping to understand how elections work around the world. Part 1: Parts of an Election will examine the different parts of an election, including ballots, the electoral districts, and the right to vote. We will also examine the different electoral systems that translate citizen votes into some type of (ideally) representative government. Next, Part 2: The Election Process examines the mechanics of casting votes, counting them, and reporting the results to the public. Finally, in Part 3: Performance, we will

consider how to assess the effectiveness of elections, in addition to exploring threats to electoral integrity. By the end of this book, you will (hopefully) develop an understanding of the various pieces of electoral machinery that are at work before, during, and after you cast a vote.

# PART 1: PARTS OF AN ELECTION



An election is a complex undertaking with thousands of interconnected parts. This section of the book will examine a set of specific components that are essential for elections to function.

# CHAPTER 1: ELECTORAL DISTRICTS

## Chapter Outline




*Photo by Edmond Dantès, Pexels License.*

# 1.0 Introduction

In 2021, Canadians voted to elect a Parliament with 338 members. A few years later, in the 2025 elections, there were 343 Members of Parliament (MP) to be elected. Each of those members represents a specific geographic area called an **electoral district**. In this section, we will examine the different types of electoral districts used in legislative and executive elections.

## Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Recall the different types of electoral districts
- Differentiate between single-member and multi-member districts
- Describe different options for drawing district boundaries
- Explain which factors are considered when drawing district boundaries

## Things We Need to Know

In this chapter, you can expect to encounter the following terms/concepts:

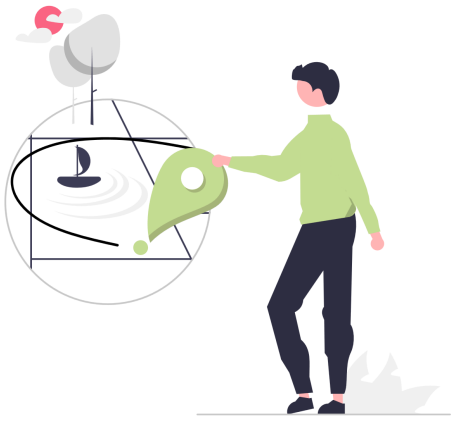
- District magnitude
- Representation by population
- Redistricting
- Gerrymandering

You may hear other words used in place of electoral district. You may hear the terms **riding** or **constituency** used to describe electoral districts. Both terms are appropriate and may be used interchangeably.

# 1.1 Electoral Districts

## What is a district?

Elections are a process for translating the preferences of a group into some type of collective choice. For many political communities, voting is a natural, emergent process of making collective decisions. When attempting to study elections, it is essential to define the scope: where is the election happening? Generally, there is a jurisdictional boundary within which the election is taking place. This might be a civic division, such as a city **ward**, or it may be a country-wide election to elect a new leader. The geographic location where the election takes place is known as the **electoral district**.

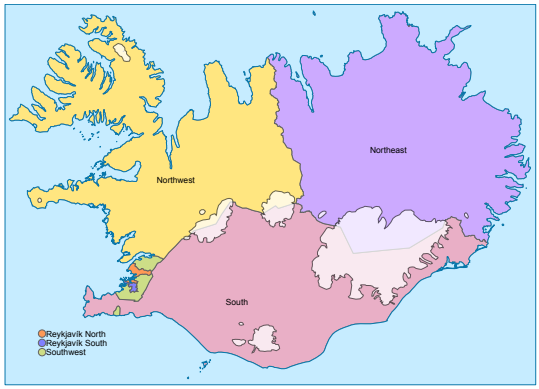


Some elections are conducted to fill seats in a governing body, such as a parliament, congress, council, or board. These elections might be national, sub-national, or local elections.

- *National Election* – electing representatives for a parliament, congress, or national assembly.
- *Sub-national Elections*– electing representatives for a regional governing body, such as states or provinces.
- *Local Elections* – electing representatives for a local governing body, such as a city, town, or county.

## Links to a Legislature

The seats in legislative bodies often correspond to a specific geographic area. For example, in local elections, a city or municipality may be organized into a series of wards that correspond to specific neighbourhoods or boroughs. The city council would be composed of representatives from each ward. Additionally, Parliamentary systems in the Westminster tradition (such as the UK, Canada, and Australia) are organized around the importance of maintaining a direct link between local residents, called constituents, and their national government. Often, the seats in a legislature are distributed in accordance with population. This is known as **representation by population**. Densely populated urban centres will be allocated more representatives in the legislature than sparsely populated areas. In order to facilitate this representation, the area is subdivided into discrete electoral districts.




*Iceland is divided into six electoral districts. "Electoral districts of Iceland" by Bjarki S, Public Domain*

# 1.2 Types of Electoral Districts

## Single-Member vs Multi-Member

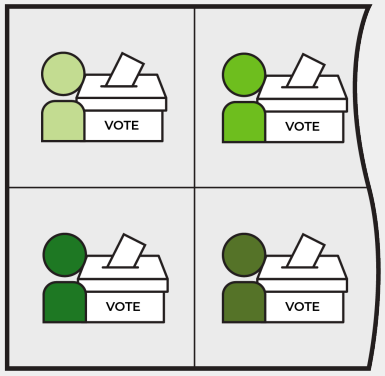
Broadly speaking, there are two general categories of electoral districts. Single-Member and Multi-Member. In a single-member district, one office or position is being contested. There may be many candidates or parties contesting the election, but only one candidate will be elected as the winner. Similarly, in a multi-member district, there will also be multiple candidates or parties participating in the election; however, there is more than one winner from a given district.

## Example: Ward System vs At-Large

Consider the example of electing a council to represent a city or township. Let's assume the town needs to elect four councillors to represent the townspeople. The town could choose between two methods of electing the council. One method, the most common option, is to divide the town into four geographic areas, often called wards. In each ward, candidates would compete to be the representative on the council. Since only one candidate can win each ward, they are **single-member districts**. The council will be composed of the four winning candidates from each ward.

### *Key Point: Ward System*

- The town is divided into wards.
- One member is elected from each ward.
- Each ward is a single-member district.

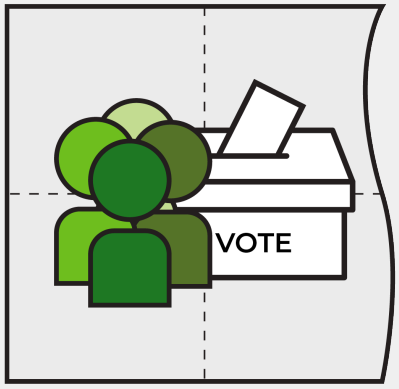



*"Ward System" by Koen Liddiard, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

Conversely, the town could simply invite all interested candidates to compete in a city-wide election, regardless of their specific location. Instead of wards, the candidates would compete in one giant district – called an **at-large** district – with the top four candidates serving as the town council. Since four candidates will be elected from the district, it can be considered a multi-member district.

### *Key Point: At-Large System*

- The town is **not** divided into wards.
- Multiple candidates compete for four spots in one large district.
- The four candidates with the highest vote totals are the winners.




*"At-Large System" by Koen Liddiard, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

## District Magnitude

The number of candidates (winning candidates) to be elected from each electoral district is known as the **district magnitude**. A district magnitude of one indicates that voters will select one candidate. There may be many candidates contesting the election; however, only one will be named the winner. **Multi-member districts** will have a district magnitude greater than one, which means several representatives will be elected from each district. Table 1.2.1 compares district magnitude across two countries.

**Table 1.2.1 District Magnitude Canada vs. Finland. (ACE Project, n.d.-a).**

| Country | Seats in Legislature | Number of Districts | Average District Magnitude | Explanation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Canada | 343 | 343 | 1 | One representative is elected from each electoral district. |
| Finland | 200 | 15 | 13.3 | Districts will elect multiple members, depending on geography and population size. |

# 1.3 Drawing District Boundaries

Some district borders are fixed; they might be a city, state, province, or entire country. There is no confusion about where the district begins and ends. However, for other electoral districts, the borders are drawn to delineate one district from another. Inevitably, it may be necessary to redraw district borders to account for population changes.

## Why Redraw Borders?

In most electoral systems, electoral districts exist to represent a defined population within a specific geographic area. There is often a requirement that electoral districts be somewhat comparable (if not equal) in size or population. This can pose problems when populations grow (or shrink) in some areas. To account for population changes, countries such as Canada and the United States have statutory requirements to redraw district borders after the decennial census. This process of boundary delineation is more commonly known as **redistricting**.

### Renovating the House?

- *Adding More Seats:* The House of Commons in the Canadian Parliament added five seats after the 2020 census, bringing the total to 343.
- *Removing Seats*: The House of Representatives in the American Congress is fixed at 435. Therefore, after each census, the seat total won't change, but the distribution of seats will. For example, in the redistricting cycle following the 2020 census, some states, like New York and California, lost a seat in Congress, while others, such as Florida and Texas, gained seats.

*"Seats of the governing party" Makaristos, Public Domain.*

## Who Draws the Borders?

There are different methods for establishing and changing the boundaries of electoral districts. Canada, for example, uses an **Independent Redistricting Commission (IRC)** to draw district borders. The Commission, called the **Electoral Boundaries Commission**, follows a gradual, transparent process that includes offering proposed maps for public input.

## What factors should be taken into consideration?

### Population

In Canada and the United States, there are requirements that districts be approximately equal-sized. In Canada, a benchmark number is used (called an **electoral quotient**) to guide the redistricting process. The number represents the average population size for all districts. In the 2022 redistricting cycle, that number was 121,891 (Elections Canada, 2022).

### Geography

Geographic landmarks such as rivers and mountains can serve as natural boundaries for proposed electoral districts. Additionally, sparsely populated rural areas might be drawn with smaller population sizes to avoid the district becoming too large geographically.

### Contiguity

A district is considered to be contiguous if a voter can travel anywhere within the district without having to cross a boundary into another district (Levit, 2020).

### Consistency

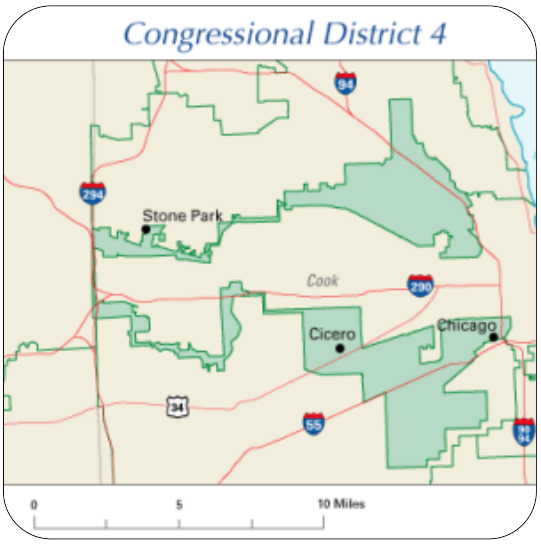
There may be an attempt to keep districts the same across different administrative divisions (i.e. national and provincial) to avoid confusing voters.

### Communities of Interest

Borders might be drawn to include specific ethnic or linguistic communities.

# 1.4 Gerrymandering

Some American States use IRCs to draw district boundaries. However, many other states allow the state legislature to draw borders. This can pose problems as elected officials often have an incentive to draw borders in a manner that is advantageous for their political party. This is known as **gerrymandering**. The Gerrymandering of electoral districts can lead to some strange configurations. One famous example is the oddly shaped 4th Congressional District of Illinois.




*"Illinois District 4 2004" by Scott Ritchie, Public Domain*

### Why Gerrymander?

There are several motivations for manipulating district borders:

- *Incumbency Protection* – Drawing districts to increase the chances that an incumbent politician will get reelected.
- *Racial Gerrymandering* – Drawing districts in a manner that dilutes the political power of a racial or ethnic group.
- *Partisan Gerrymandering* – Drawing districts to ensure a numerical advantage for a political party.

## Cracking and Packing

Two common tactics employed in gerrymandering are **cracking** and **packing** (MIT Election Data and Science Lab, 2025). Cracking is drawing districts in a manner that divides a group of voters into several districts, ensuring they don't form a majority in any one district. Packing, on the other hand, involves drawing a district so that a numerically dominant voting group is confined to a single district. They will win that district easily, but they won't be competitive elsewhere.

## Try It: Gerrymandering

How Gerrymandering works. See image description

*"Gerrymandering" by M. Boli, CC BY-SA 4.0.*

Image Description
A visual explanation of gerrymandering using coloured grids to represent voters and voting districts. The title reads "How to Steal an Election," with a subtitle, "An introduction to gerrymandering, or how politicians pick their voters."

On the left is a 10-by-6 grid with 60% yellow squares and 40% green squares, representing voters. The caption says, "Each square is a voter. Yellow party: 60%, Green party: 40%."

To the right are two sets of the same grid, each divided into 5 voting districts in different ways:

The first grid is labelled "5 districts – fair outcome," showing simple vertical slices where the yellow party wins 3 out of 5 districts (a 60/40 split).

The second grid is labelled "5 districts – rigged outcome," showing irregular district shapes where the yellow party wins 4 out of 5 districts, overrepresenting their vote share.

Below are two more versions of the grid:

The left is labelled "Packing: 3 Yellow wins, 2 Green wins." It groups almost all green voters into 2 districts (concentrating their votes), allowing yellow to narrowly win the remaining 3.

The right is labelled "Cracking: 5 Yellow wins." It splits green voters across all districts, diluting their influence and giving yellow a win in every district.

The overall message shows how gerrymandering can unfairly influence election outcomes by redrawing district lines.

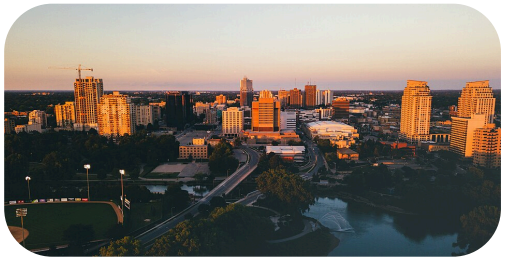
## Benefits of Independent Redistricting

Gerrymandering can be described as a process in which the politicians choose their voters, which inverts the democratic ideal of having voters choose their representatives. The manipulation of district boundaries can have negative consequences for the political system. Aside from the tangible impact of denying groups from meaningful participation in the democratic process, it can increase cynicism and foster distrust in the political system. Conversely, Independent redistricting processes can provide transparency and offer meaningful opportunities for public participation (Sadhwani, 2022).

# 1.5 Chapter Summary

## Real Life Example: London, Ontario

In 2024, the City of London undertook a ward boundary review to address future population growth. Without addressing the ward boundaries, there would be significant differences in population as the city grows. The project involved multiple phases, including several opportunities for public consultation. The goal of ensuring effective representation was based on four key considerations:



*"London Ontario Skyline 2017" by Mcalpinestudios, CC BY-SA 4.0*

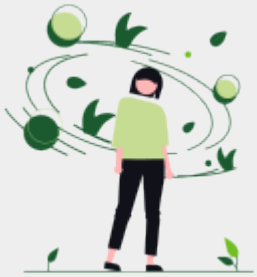
1. *Representation by population:* wards should be approximately equal in population.
2. *Population growth:* Disparities would be minimized as the population grows.
3. *Communities of interest:* neighbourhoods and communities would be located in a single ward.
4. *Natural borders:* borders should be "straightforward" (i.e. using major streets or railway tracks as dividing lines).

This video outlines the steps in London's redistricting process.

Watch Ward Boundary Review – London, ON at https://youtu.be/760Mct4-8YU?feature=shared

### What do you think?

- What do you think of this process?
- Did the city do an effective job of communicating with the public?
- Do you think anything could have been improved?



## Chapter Summary

- Electoral districts, also known as ridings or constituencies, are geographic areas represented by elected officials, forming the basis for how representatives are chosen in national, regional, and local elections.
- Elections occur within defined geographic boundaries and can be categorized as national (e.g., Parliament), sub-national (e.g., provincial legislatures), or local (e.g., municipal councils).
- Electoral districts can be single-member, where one representative is elected per district, or multi-member, where several representatives are elected from a larger district.
- The number of representatives elected from a district is known as district magnitude; for example, Canada has a magnitude of one per district, while Finland has multi-member districts with higher magnitudes.
- District boundaries must sometimes be redrawn through a process called redistricting to account for population changes and maintain fair representation, often following a national census.
- In Canada, independent commissions manage redistricting using public input and factors like population equality, geographic features, contiguity, and communities of interest.
- Gerrymandering is a politically motivated manipulation of district boundaries, common in some U.S. states, that can undermine fair representation through tactics like packing and cracking.
- Independent redistricting helps restore public trust and ensure equitable representation, as shown by London, Ontario's 2024 ward review, which used clear criteria and public consultation to address future growth.

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OpenAI. (2025, May 12). ChatGPT. [Large language model]. https://www.chatgpt.com Prompt: Summarize the passage into 8 key points with no additional bullets. *Edited & Reviewed by author.*

## Key Terms

**At-large system –** An electoral system in which officials are elected by all voters in the jurisdiction rather than from specific districts or wards.

**Constituency –** Another term for electoral district, emphasizing the group of voters represented by an elected official.

**Cracking –** A gerrymandering tactic that splits a group of voters across multiple districts to dilute their voting power.

**District magnitude –** The number of representatives elected from an electoral district. A magnitude of 1 means only one person is elected; a higher magnitude means multiple representatives.

**Electoral Boundaries Commission –** The Canadian body responsible for reviewing and adjusting the boundaries of federal electoral districts based on census data.

**Electoral district –** A geographic area represented by elected officials. In elections, each district selects one or more representatives to a legislative body.

**Electoral quotient –** A target population number used in redistricting to guide the creation of electoral districts that are roughly equal in population size.

**Gerrymandering –** Manipulating the boundaries of electoral districts to favour a political party or group, often undermining fair representation.

**Independent Redistricting Commission (IRC) –** A non-partisan body responsible for drawing electoral district boundaries to reduce political influence and promote fairness.

**Multi-member districts –** Electoral districts that elect two or more representatives. Several candidates with the highest vote totals are elected.

**Packing –** A gerrymandering tactic that concentrates a group of voters into a single district to minimize their influence in other districts.

**Redistricting –** The process of redrawing the boundaries of electoral districts, typically after a census, to reflect population changes.

**Riding –** A synonym for electoral district, commonly used in Canada.

**Single-member districts –** Electoral districts that elect only one representative. The candidate with the most votes wins.

**Ward –** A local electoral district within a municipality, often used in city council elections.

# CHAPTER 2: BALLOTS

## Chapter Outline



*Photo by Arnaud Jaegers, Unsplash License.*

# 2.0 Introduction

In the course of group deliberations, have you ever been asked to express a preference among a range of alternatives? How did that look? Perhaps you were asked to raise a hand by a meeting chair asking for "all those in favour…" Maybe you've been asked by a coworker to select a preferred meeting time using a Doodle poll or Survey Monkey. Maybe you choose a team captain by writing someone's name on a piece of paper. All of these represent completing a **ballot**, and ballots are the physical tools we use to cast votes.

## Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Recall how ballots have evolved over time.
- Describe the different features of a ballot.
- Explain how ballot design decisions can confuse voters.

## Things we need to know

In this chapter, you can expect to encounter the following terms/concepts.

- Viva voce
- Australian Ballot
- Ranked Choice Ballot
- Overvote
- Undervote
- Spoiled Ballot
- Butterfly Ballot

# 2.1 Historical Voting Practices

Expressing electoral preferences has taken many forms over the centuries: using corn and beans; lining up on opposite sides of a road, or even shouting your vote in public. Voters in Medieval Venice used little metal balls, called *ballottas,* to cast votes, which likely inspired the term we use today (Mayton & Reno, 2021). The process of casting votes has undergone many changes before producing the paper ballots we recognize today.

## Brawls, Booze, and Ballots

*A county election where locals were casting their votes 'viva voce'. "The County Election, 1852" by George Caleb Bingham from the Saint Louis Art Museum, Public Domain.*

Prior to the 19th century, elections throughout Europe and North America didn't even use ballots. Rather, voters indicated their preferences verbally while a clerk or scribe tallied the choices. This practice of voice voting was known as ***Viva voce***. As you might imagine, announcing votes publicly presented challenges.

For one, intimidation was rampant. The Canadian Museum for Human Rights describes the atmosphere as one of "brawls, booze, and ballots" where bribery and intimidation were rampant (McRae, 2019). Elections Canada estimates that at least 20 Canadians lost their lives due to voting-related violence (Elections Canada, 2021), although comprehensive official statistics aren't available. Violence and intimidation weren't the only problems. Early Canadian elections involved a process known as **treating**, which was a name given to offering food, drink, and even cash in exchange for votes (McRae, 2019).

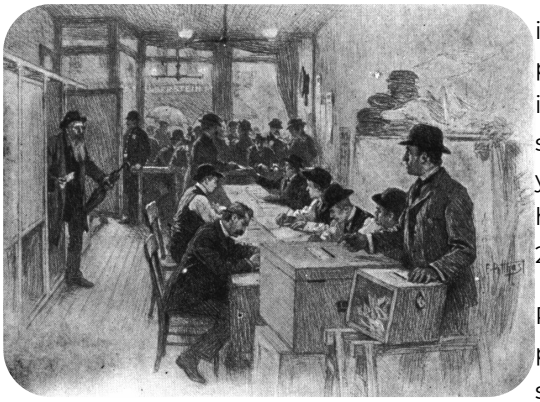
*"Back view of the Church of St. Eustache and dispersion of the insurgents" by Lord Charles Beauclerk, from the McCord Collection, Public Domain.*

Aside from the potential for corruption, voice voting has a weakness of scale. It might work in smaller rural communities where the population might have a few dozen eligible voters, but it becomes unworkable as populations grow. As industrialization and urbanization pulled people closer together, new systems for casting votes evolved. By the 18th century, paper ballots became more common.

## Paper Ballots

Early paper ballots weren't much better. At times, voters were encouraged to prepare and use their own ballots. It was also common for newspapers or political parties to create a ballot for their preferred candidates called a **ticket**. These ballots sometimes doubled as a source of party propaganda and disparagement (Cheng, 2020). In 1858, the Australian government acted to bring consistency to the chaos of election voting by printing uniform ballots at the expense of the state. (Mayton & Reno, 2021). The measure incorporated two important innovations. For one, the government would produce standardized lists of candidates, and second, the ballots would be marked in private (Cheng, 2020). This practice of casting a paper ballot in secret became known as the **Australian Ballot**.

## The Australian Ballot



*“New York polling place c. 1900” by E. Benjamin Andrews, Public Domain.*

This ‘Kangaroo Vote’ or ‘Australian Secret Ballot’ eventually made its way to North America. New Brunswick was the first Canadian province to use a secret ballot in 1855 (Marsh, 2009), with a federal implementation in 1874 (Elections Canada, 2021). The first use of a secret paper ballot in America was in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1885, yet it was opposed by “machine politicians” who were probably happy with the existing system of bribery & intimidation (Keyssar, 2000).

Resistance was common. In 1892, voters in one West Virginia precinct demolished a polling station in protest of using the secret ballot (Wiggins, 2020). While the problem of intimidation was indeed reduced, the elimination of voice voting posed new challenges for an electorate that lacked widespread literacy. The adoption of paper ballots meant voters now needed to decipher complex written instructions and confusing ballot designs.

# 2.2 Ballot Design

What information should be included on a ballot? Are the candidate names sufficient? Or should additional information, such as party affiliation, be included? And should the ballots be available in multiple languages? These are important considerations for ballot design, and there are different options available for election administrators.

## Basic Ballot Features

Most ballots typically contain the date, the name of the office or electoral district being contested, a list of choices, and instructions for voters (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-h). Election administrators must balance the need to provide information to voters with the risk of creating a ballot that is too complex. At a minimum, ballots should be easy to understand and easy to count.

## Listing the Choices

Ballots will list the choices available to voters. This is often done by listing the candidates in alphabetical order. Another option is to list any candidate running for reelection – called an incumbent – at the top of the list. It's possible that the order of candidates on a ballot can influence election outcomes. For example, some research has found that candidates whose names are placed higher on the list might receive higher vote shares and be more likely to win the election than those with names placed lower on the list (MIT Election Data + Science Lab, 2022).

### Marking the Ballot

The ballot must also specify the type of action required to indicate their choice. Several options are available:

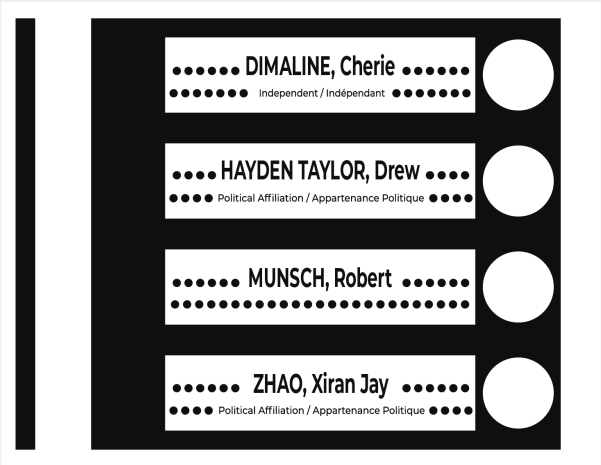
- **Mark Choice***:* A mark choice ballot is the most common method for indicating a preference. Voters will typically place a mark or other indication beside the candidate they prefer. This could also involve punching a hole through paper, selecting an option on a touchscreen interface, or writing a candidate's name into a blank space.
- **Rank Choice***:* A subcategory of mark choice ballot is a rank choice ballot. In this format, voters rank their preferred candidates or parties in descending order.
- **Negative Choice***:* In a negative choice format, voters are asked to cross out the candidates they don't want. These ballots can be more error-prone and difficult to count.

(ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-h)

## Examples of Election Ballots

### Single-Choice Ballot

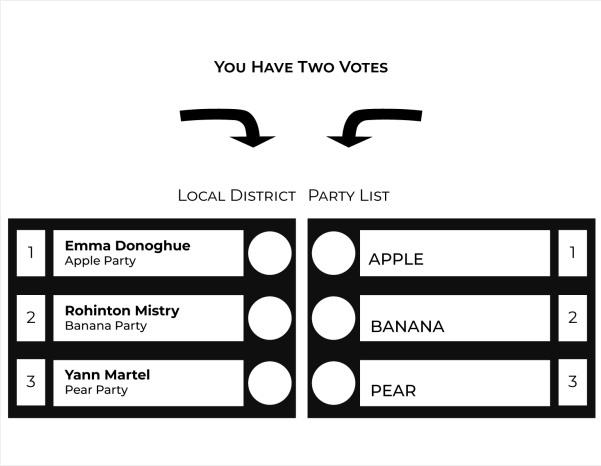
Ballots for Canadian federal elections use a simple, single-choice format. The candidate names are listed in alphabetical order with the party affiliation indicated below. Voters mark an X in the space beside the candidate of their choice.




*"Single Choice Ballot" by Koen Liddiard, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Image based on Form of Ballot Paper from the Writ of Election by the Justice Laws of Canada.*

### Two-Choice Ballot

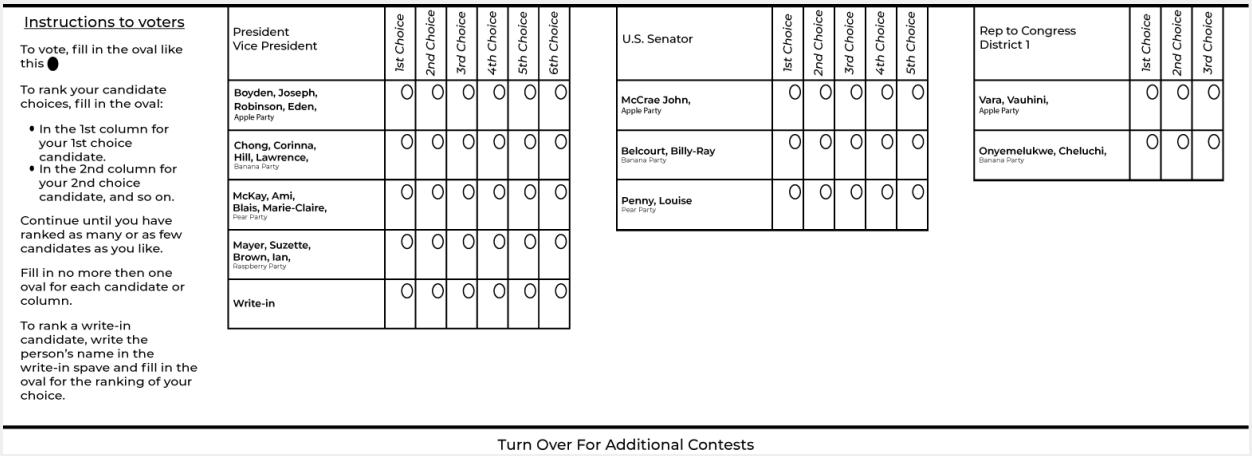
In German national elections, voters cast two votes. One is for a local candidate while the other is for party representatives at the national level.




*"Two Choice Ballot" by Koen Liddiard, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Image-based off German Ballot as found in German Elections – The Data Vis Explanation by Lisa Charlotte Muth.*

## Ranked Choice Ballot

Some American States, such as Maine, use ranked-choice voting, where voters rank the candidates in order of preference.



Instructions to voters

To vote, fill in the oval like this ●

To rank your candidate choices, fill in the oval:

- In the 1st column for your 1st choice candidate.
- In the 2nd column for your 2nd choice candidate, and so on.

Continue until you have ranked as many or as few candidates as you like.

Fill in no more then one oval for each candidate or column.

To rank a write-in candidate, write the person's name in the write-in spave and fill in the oval for the ranking of your choice.

| President Vice President | 1st Choice | 2nd Choice | 3rd Choice | 4th Choice | 5th Choice | 6th Choice |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Boyden, Joseph, Robinson, Eden, Apple Party | O | O | O | O | O | O |
| Chong, Corinna, Hill, Lawrence, Banana Party | O | O | O | O | O | O |
| McKay, Ami, Blais, Marie-Claire, Pear Party | O | O | O | O | O | O |
| Mayer, Suzette, Brown, Ian, Raspberry Party | O | O | O | O | O | O |
| Write-in | O | O | O | O | O | O |

| U.S. Senator | 1st Choice | 2nd Choice | 3rd Choice | 4th Choice | 5th Choice |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| McCrae John, Apple Party | O | O | O | O | O |
| Belcourt, Billy-Ray Banana Party | O | O | O | O | O |
| Penny, Louise Pear Party | O | O | O | O | O |

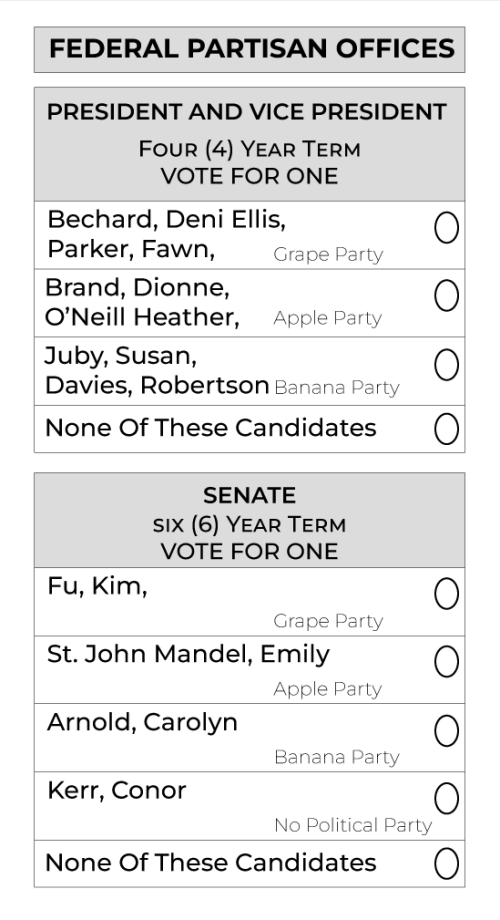
| Rep to Congress District 1 | 1st Choice | 2nd Choice | 3rd Choice |
|---|---|---|---|
| Vara, Vauhini, Apple Party | O | O | O |
| Onyemelukwe, Cheluchi, Banana Party | O | O | O |

Turn Over For Additional Contests

*"Ranked Ballot" by Koen Liddiard, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Based on Sthe tate of Maine Sample Ballot found on the National Civic Review: How Ranked Choice Voting Could Improve Presidential Elections by the National Civic League*

## Ballots With None of the Above Options

In some electoral systems, voters have an opportunity to express a non-preference. For example, this ballot from Nevada gives voters the option of choosing None of these candidates.




*"None of the Above Ballot" by Koen Liddiard, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Based on an excerpt for a general election sample ballot from Nevada found on Ballotpedia*

## Ballots With Weird Graphics

Ballots in New York State once had a requirement that each candidate's row begin with a graphic pointing finger.

| OFFICE | 1<br>PRESIDENTIAL ELECTORSS FOR PRESIDENT AND VICE PRESIDENT<br>(VOTE FOR ONE) | 2<br>SENATE<br>(VOTE FOR ONE) | 3<br>REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS<br>22ND CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT<br>(VOTE FOR ONE) |
|---|---|---|---|
|  | B BANANA 1B<br>MACDONALD, ANN-MARIE<br>PRESIDENT<br>FERGUSON, IAN<br>VICE PRESIDENT | B BANANA 2B<br>CARRIER, ROCH | B BANANA 3B<br>AGNANT, MARIE-CELIE |
|  | R RASPBERRY 1R<br>HERRING, NICHOLAS,<br>PRESIDENT<br>DUNIC, NINA<br>VICE PRESIDENT | R RASPBERRY 2R<br>KING, THOMAS | |
|  | G GRAPE 1G<br>HAY, ELIZABETH<br>PRESIDENT<br>FORGET, ANDRE<br>VICE PRESIDENT | G GRAPE 2G<br>TOEWS, MIRIAM | G GRAPE 3G<br>BIDINI, DAVE |
|  | | P PEAR 2P<br>PEARSON, KIT | |
|  | A APPLE 1A<br>LAMA, TSERING YANGZOM<br>PRESIDENT<br>WILL, FERGUSON<br>VICE PRESIDENT | A APPLE 2A<br>ROSS, SINCLAIR | |

*“Ballots with Weird Graphics” by Koen Liddiard, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Based on the Whitestown, NY voting ballot found in The Election Disaster That Wasn’t by Mark Vanhoenacker in Slate.*

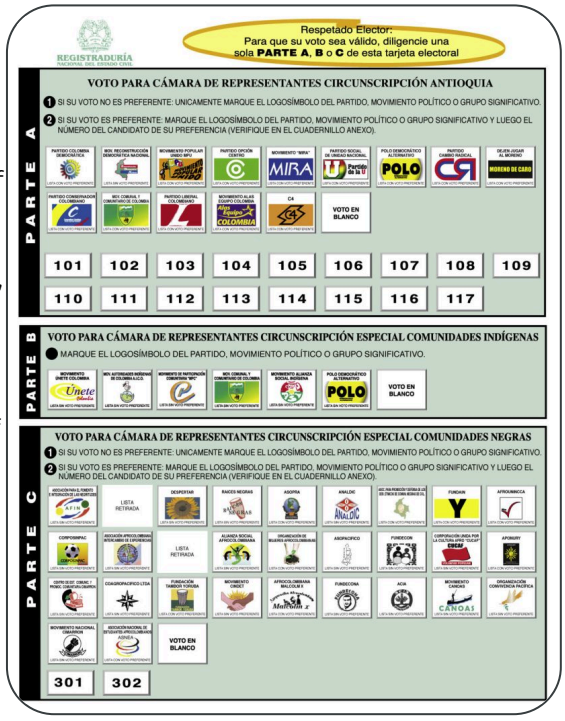
# 2.3 Ballot Complexity

In some elections, voters are making multiple choices on the same ballot. Elections in the United States are an excellent example. In a general election, voters are electing officials for many different levels of government. The same ballot might include choices for President, Senate, Representative, Governor, School Board, County Commissioners, and more. There will also be a section of the ballot that is informational in nature, where voter instructions are indicated. Longer and more detailed ballots can take longer to count, and they can potentially confuse voters.

## Measuring Complexity

If a ballot is confusing or if voter instructions aren't clear, voters may place a mark on their ballot incorrectly, causing the ballot to be rejected. Some research from Colombia suggests that the confusing ballot design used in the 2006 and 2010 elections resulted in over 30% of ballots being rejected (Pachón et al., 2017). Once the design was improved for elections in 2011, the number of rejected ballots decreased by 38%.

When voters place more markings on the ballot than are required, it is known as an **overvote**. Assessing the frequency of overvotes can reveal a potentially confusing ballot design. Similarly, confusing ballot design can result in **undervoting**. An **undervote** occurs when a vote was not cast in a particular race or a section of the ballot was left blank. This can happen with complex ballots that require voters to make multiple selections or mark the ballot in several areas. Disproportionate frequencies of undervotes can also be indicative of a confusing ballot design.



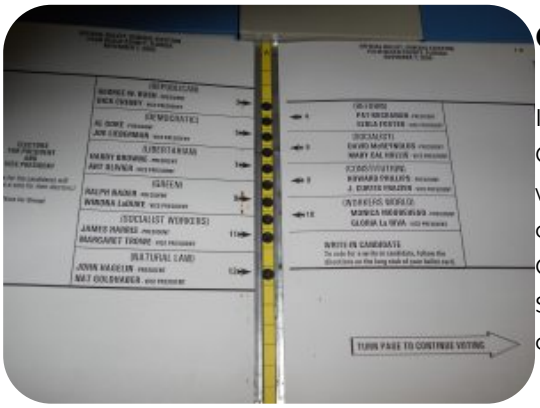

*Second ballot design (2006), national elections. Ballot for the house of representatives, Antioquia. From "Ballot design and invalid votes: Evidence from Colombia" by Pachón, Carroll, & Barragán, FDEd (CAN).*

### Spoiled Ballots

When a voter deliberately marks a ballot incorrectly, this is known as a **spoiled ballot**. Voters may do this as a form of protest or to express dissatisfaction with the election process. Spoiled ballots are not counted.

## Examples of Confusing Ballots

The choice of ballot design can have real-world consequences. It's possible that a confusing ballot design can result in enough undervotes or overvotes to influence the election results.




*"Votomatic 2000 Palm Beach County 010" by Clariosophic, CC BY-SA 3.0.*

### Overvotes in Florida

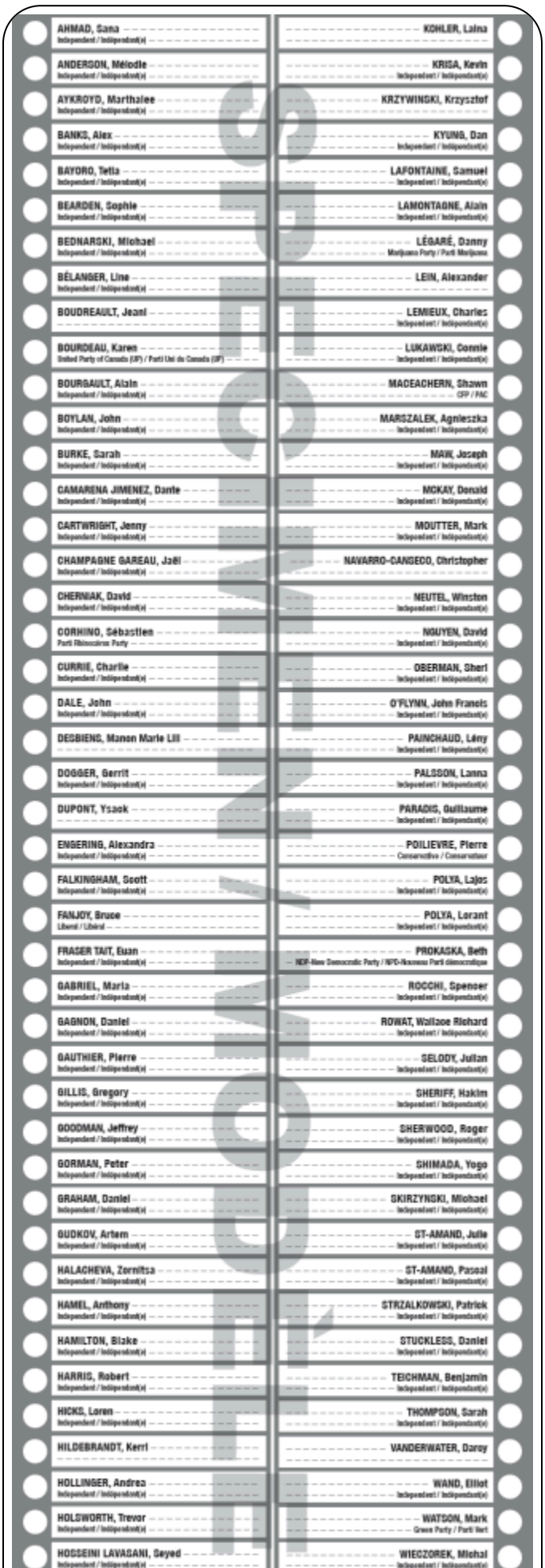
In the 2000 United States general election, voters in Palm Beach County cast votes using a **butterfly ballot**. In this country, there were over 19,000 overvotes, which was unusually high for the state of Florida. Of those 19,000 votes, 80% were intended as votes for Gore, who ultimately lost the vote tally in Florida by 537 votes. Some researchers attribute the erroneous overvotes to the confusing ballot design (Agresti & Presnell, 2002).

### Undervotes in Florida

In the 2018 midterm elections, Broward County in Florida used a ballot design that placed voter instructions in the same column as a key Senate Race. As a general practice, voter instructions are usually placed in their own column or separate area of the ballot to avoid confusing voters. This unusual placement may have led to approximately 25,000 undervotes in a race that was decided by 11,000 votes (Morse et al., 2024).

## Bizarre Ballots

Despite having a simple ballot design, some Canadian elections produce ballots that are unusually long. In the 2025 Canadian federal election, there was a coordinated effort by activist groups to flood a riding with candidates. 91 candidates registered to run in the riding of Carleton as a form of protest against Canada's electoral system. The resulting ballot was almost one meter long!


AHMAD, Sana
Independent / Indépendant(e)
ANDERSON, Mélodie
Independent / Indépendant(e)
AYKROYD, Marthalee
Independent / Indépendant(e)
BANKS, Alex
Independent / Indépendant(e)
BAYORO, Tetia
Independent / Indépendant(e)
BEARDEN, Sophie
Independent / Indépendant(e)
BEDNARSKI, Michael
Independent / Indépendant(e)
BÉLANGER, Line
Independent / Indépendant(e)
BOUDREAULT, Jeani
BOURDEAU, Karen
United Party of Canada (UP) / Parti Uni du Canada (UP)
BOURGAULT, Alain
Independent / Indépendant(e)
BOYLAN, John
Independent / Indépendant(e)
BURKE, Sarah
Independent / Indépendant(e)
CAMARENA JIMENEZ, Dante
Independent / Indépendant(e)
CARTWRIGHT, Jenny
Independent / Indépendant(e)
CHAMPAGNE GAREAU, Jaël
Independent / Indépendant(e)
CHERNIAK, David
Independent / Indépendant(e)
CORNINO, Sébastien
Parti Rhinocéros Party
CURRIE, Charlie
Independent / Indépendant(e)
DALE, John
Independent / Indépendant(e)
DESBIENS, Manon Marie Lili
DOGGER, Gerrit
Independent / Indépendant(e)
DUPONT, Ysaak
ENGERING, Alexandra
Independent / Indépendant(e)
FALKINGHAM, Scott
Independent / Indépendant(e)
FANJOY, Bruce
Liberal / Libéral
FRASER TAIT, Euan
Independent / Indépendant(e)
GABRIEL, Maria
Independent / Indépendant(e)
GAGNON, Daniel
Independent / Indépendant(e)
GAUTHIER, Pierre
Independent / Indépendant(e)
GILLIS, Gregory
Independent / Indépendant(e)
GOODMAN, Jeffrey
Independent / Indépendant(e)
GORMAN, Peter
Independent / Indépendant(e)
GRAHAM, Daniel
Independent / Indépendant(e)
GUDKOV, Artem
Independent / Indépendant(e)
HALACHEVA, Zornitsa
Independent / Indépendant(e)
HAMEL, Anthony
Independent / Indépendant(e)
HAMILTON, Blake
Independent / Indépendant(e)
HARRIS, Robert
Independent / Indépendant(e)
HICKS, Loren
Independent / Indépendant(e)
HILDEBRANDT, Kerri
HOLLINGER, Andrea
Independent / Indépendant(e)
HOLSWORTH, Trevor
Independent / Indépendant(e)
HOSSEINI LAVASANI, Seyed
Independent / Indépendant(e)
KOHLER, Laina
KRISA, Kevin
Independent / Indépendant(e)
KRZYWINSKI, Krzysztof
KYUNG, Dan
Independent / Indépendant(e)
LAFONTAINE, Samuel
Independent / Indépendant(e)
LAMONTAGNE, Alain
Independent / Indépendant(e)
LÉGARÉ, Danny
Marijuana Party / Parti Marijuana
LEIN, Alexander
LEMIEUX, Charles
Independent / Indépendant(e)
LUKAWSKI, Connie
Independent / Indépendant(e)
MACEACHERN, Shawn
CFP / PAC
MARSZALEK, Agnieszka
Independent / Indépendant(e)
MAW, Joseph
Independent / Indépendant(e)
MCKAY, Donald
Independent / Indépendant(e)
MOUTTER, Mark
Independent / Indépendant(e)
NAVARRO-CANSECO, Christopher
NEUTEL, Winston
Independent / Indépendant(e)
NGUYEN, David
Independent / Indépendant(e)
OBERMAN, Sheri
Independent / Indépendant(e)
O'FLYNN, John Francis
Independent / Indépendant(e)
PAINCHAUD, Lény
Independent / Indépendant(e)
PALSSON, Lanna
Independent / Indépendant(e)
PARADIS, Guillaume
Independent / Indépendant(e)
POILIEVRE, Pierre
Conservative / Conservateur
POLYA, Lajos
Independent / Indépendant(e)
POLYA, Lorant
Independent / Indépendant(e)
PROKASKA, Beth
NDP-New Democratic Party / NPD-Nouveau Parti démocratique
ROCCHI, Spencer
Independent / Indépendant(e)
ROWAT, Wallace Richard
Independent / Indépendant(e)
SELODY, Julian
Independent / Indépendant(e)
SHERIFF, Hakim
Independent / Indépendant(e)
SHERWOOD, Roger
Independent / Indépendant(e)
SHIMADA, Yogo
Independent / Indépendant(e)
SKIRZYNSKI, Michael
Independent / Indépendant(e)
ST-AMAND, Julie
Independent / Indépendant(e)
ST-AMAND, Pascal
Independent / Indépendant(e)
STRZALKOWSKI, Patrick
Independent / Indépendant(e)
STUCKLESS, Daniel
Independent / Indépendant(e)
TEICHMAN, Benjamin
Independent / Indépendant(e)
THOMPSON, Sarah
Independent / Indépendant(e)
VANDERWATER, Darcy
WAND, Elliot
Independent / Indépendant(e)
WATSON, Mark
Green Party / Parti Vert
WIECZOREK, Michal
Independent / Indépendant(e)

*“A Sample of the Modified Two-Column Ballot Design” by Elections Canada, Non-commercial Reproduction.*

Because of the length, Elections Canada used a two-column design for this riding and adopted a modified counting procedure (Elections Canada, 2025 April).

# 2.4 Reducing Barriers

Over 200 countries in the world use some form of paper ballots (Schumacher & Connaughton, 2020), and most strive to use ballots that are simple and easy to understand; however, illiteracy, language proficiency, and disability are barriers that can prevent full participation.

### Vote By Marbles

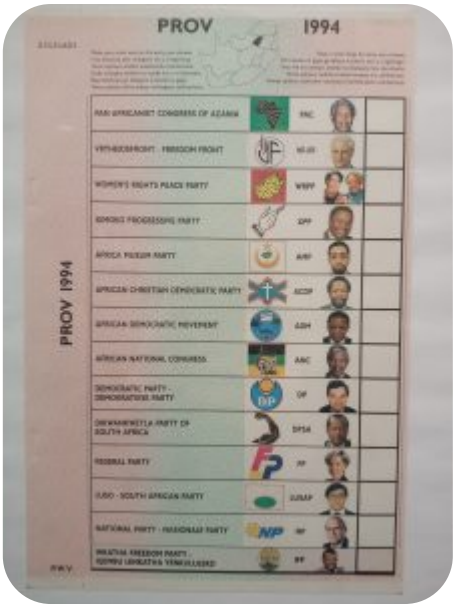
In The Gambia, where many voters are illiterate, elections are conducted by placing marbles in drums that are painted specific colours to correspond with each political party (IFES, 2023).

*"2021 Gambia Presidential Election Observation", Commonwealth Secretariat, CC BY-NC 2.0.*

## Literacy & Language Proficiency

Ballots in France are printed in French. Canadian ballots are printed in both official languages, English and French (Government of Canada, 2025). For voters who aren't fluent in an official language, voting can be difficult. Some jurisdictions offer ballots to voters in multiple languages. For example, in Cook County, Illinois, over 30% of the households speak a language other than English (ShareAmerica, 2020). To accommodate the linguistic diversity, the County makes ballots available in multiple languages, including Spanish, Korean, and Arabic (ShareAmerica, 2020). Many countries throughout Africa and Latin America use colours, party logos, and candidate photos to reduce confusion (Reynolds and Sttenbergen, 2006).

Offering ballots in multiple languages ensures that linguistic minority groups are able to participate in the democratic process.




*Ballot from South Africa's first post-apartheid election included candidate photos and party logos. "South African 1994 Election Ballot Paper", Minnekon, CC BY-SA 4.0.*

# 2.5 Simplicity and Accessibility

An accessible ballot design is one that uses a simple font with writing in sentence case and left-aligned text (MIT Election Data Science Lab, 2023, April 28). Additionally, intuitive text hierarchy makes the ballot easier to understand. Typically, the district name and contest labels will appear prominently, and candidate names will use bold text (MIT Election Data Science Lab, 2023, April 28).

### Readable Ballot Text

| Feature | Left Aligned | Centre Aligned | Right Aligned |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Lower Case** | candidate name | candidate name | candidate name |
| **All Caps** | CANDIDATE NAME | CANDIDATE NAME | CANDIDATE NAME |
| **Sentence Case** | Candidate Name | Candidate Name | Candidate Name |

Sentence case text with left alignment is the most familiar to voters in English-speaking countries.

## Ballot Best Practices

According to the American Center for Civic Design (2020), there are several design considerations that will ensure a simple, usable ballot:

### Readability

The font should be readable and consistent. Formatting and shading should be used to highlight important information.

### Consistency

The spacing should be uniform; marking spaces should be simple and consistent.

### Organization

Contests should be clearly delineated. Candidates should, where possible, be written in a single column.

### Navigation

Instructions should be placed at the beginning of the ballot; any page numbers or paging progression should be clearly indicated.

**Clarity**

Instructions should be complete with all relevant information written in simple language that voters can understand. Icons or images should enhance clarity.

## Ballot Accessibility

Well-designed ballots can reduce confusion for most voters, but it may not be sufficient for voters with limited vision or physical impairments. For voters who require additional support, some jurisdictions offer ballots with enhanced features, including braille, large text, or other assistive technologies.

### Voting Assistance in Canada

Elections Canada offers voters the following assistive features and technologies for voters:

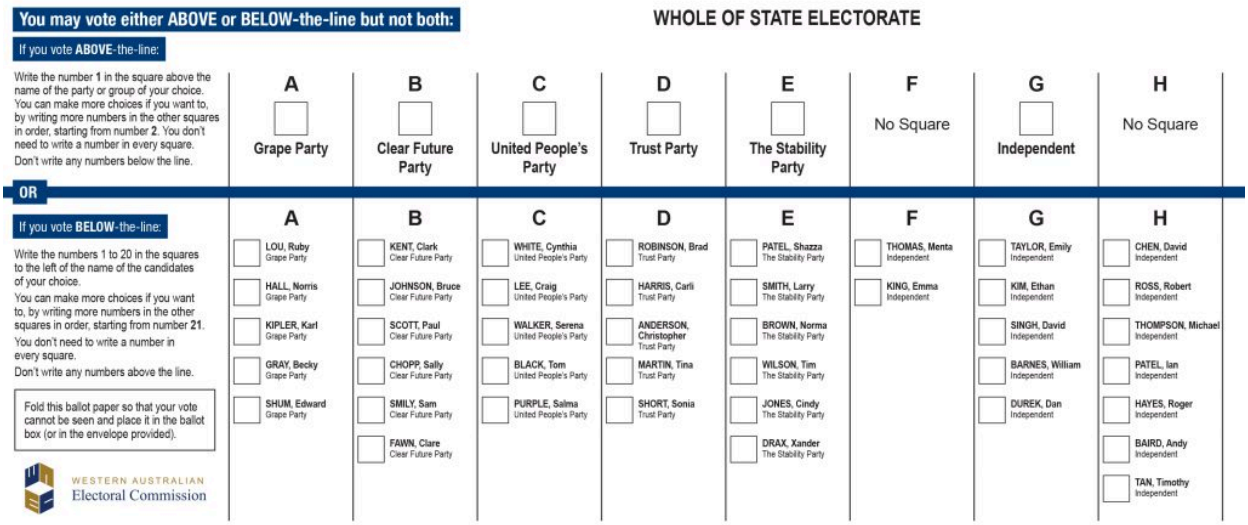
- Ballot with candidate names in large print.
- Language and sign language interpretation, and other assistance upon request in advance.
- Large-print and braille lists of candidates (braille only available on election day).
- Assistance marking your ballot.
- Tactile and braille voting template.
- Large-grip pencil or option to bring your own pen or pencil.
- Magnifiers.
- Signature guide.

Simple and accessible ballots are essential for ensuring everyone has access to the political process, but the impact goes far beyond the user experience. By ignoring principles of simplicity and accessibility, the design of the ballot might inadvertently influence the election results (MIT Election Data Science Lab, 2023, April 28).

# 2.6 Chapter Summary

## Real Life Example: Western Australia

Below is a sample ballot for Legislative Council elections in the state of Western Australia. Review the ballot (click to enlarge the image) and use the checklist below to see if it follows the recommended best practices for ballot design.




*"Whole of State Electorate", Western Australia Electoral Commission, FDEd (CAN). Click to enlarge.*

Image Description

This is a sample ballot paper from the Western Australian Electoral Commission for a whole-of-state electorate. Voters are instructed that they may vote either above the line or below the line, but not both.

Above-the-line voting: Voters write the number 1 in one of the boxes above the party columns (A to E), and can continue with numbers in other boxes in order of preference.

Below-the-line voting: Voters number individual candidates in the boxes to the left of their names from 1 to 20, and may continue numbering further if they choose.

There are eight columns labelled A through H, with columns A to E containing party names and logos (Grape Party, Clear Future Party, United People's Party, Trust Party, The Stability Party) and a blank box above each. Columns F and H have no box above the line, and columns F to H contain only independent candidates.

Each column lists multiple candidates with square checkboxes next to their names. For example:

Column A (Grape Party) lists six candidates, including LOU, Ruby and SHUM, and Edward.

Column G (Independent) includes TAYLOR, Emily and DUREK, Dan.

Column H (Independent) includes CHEN, David and TAN, Timothy.

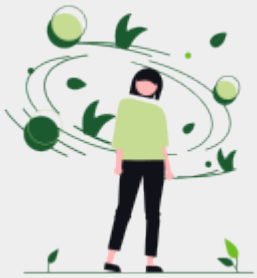
Instructions emphasize not mixing above-the-line and below-the-line voting, and to fold the ballot paper before placing it in the ballot box.

Checklist questions:

- The font is readable and consistent.
- Text is left-aligned and written in sentence case
- Formatting and shading are used to highlight important information.
- The spacing between candidates is equal
- Marking spaces are simple and consistent (i.e. all squares or all circles)
- The contests are clearly delineated.
- Instructions are placed where voters can see them
- Instructions are complete with all relevant information
- Instructions are written in simple language that voters can understand.
- Icons or images are used to enhance clarity.

## What do you think?

- Is it an effective ballot design?
- Are there any improvements you would recommend?



## Further Reading & Resources

If you'd like to learn more about this topic, check out the following article:

- Disenfranchised by Design from ProPublica.

## Chapter Summary

- Ballots, the tools for casting votes, have evolved from public voice voting (viva voce) to private paper ballots due to issues like bribery, violence, and limited scalability.
- The Australian Ballot introduced uniform, government-printed ballots with secret voting, greatly reducing intimidation but introducing challenges for voters with limited literacy.
- Ballot design impacts accessibility and outcomes; features like candidate order, ballot layout, and how choices are marked (single, ranked, or negative) can all influence voter behaviour.
- Complex ballots, such as those used in the U.S., may include multiple races and instructions, increasing the risk of overvotes, undervotes, and spoiled ballots due to voter confusion.
- Poor ballot design can lead to election-affecting errors; notable examples include the 2000 Florida "butterfly ballot" and the 2018 Florida Senate undervote caused by confusing layouts.
- Language and literacy barriers can prevent voter participation; some countries use visual aids like colors, logos, and photos, or ballots in multiple languages to improve accessibility.
- Best practices for ballot simplicity and accessibility include using left-aligned sentence case text, clear formatting, consistent spacing, and accessible versions for voters with disabilities.
- Ballot design is not just about user experience—it can significantly impact democratic participation and electoral outcomes by either supporting or obstructing voter understanding.

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OpenAI. (2025, May 27). ChatGPT. [Large language model]. https://www.chatgpt.com Prompt: Can you please summarize the passage into 8 key points with no additional bullets. *Edited & Reviewed by author.*

## Key Terms

**Australian Ballot** – A government-printed, standardized ballot that lists all candidates and is marked by voters in secret. Introduced in Australia in the 19th century, it reduced vote-buying and intimidation and is now standard in many democracies.

**Butterfly Ballot** – A ballot design with choices on both sides of a central column, which can confuse voters. The term became widely known after the 2000 U.S. election in Palm Beach County, Florida, where its confusing layout led to many misvotes.

**Mark Choice –** A mark choice ballot is the most common method for indicating a preference. Voters will typically place a mark or other indication beside the candidate they prefer. This could also involve punching a hole through paper, selecting an option on a touchscreen interface, or writing a candidate's name into a blank space.

**Negative Choice –** In a negative choice format, voters are asked to cross out the candidates they don't want. These ballots can be more error-prone and difficult to count.

**Overvote** – Occurs when a voter selects more options than allowed in a particular race or contest, rendering that part of the ballot invalid.

**Rank Choice** – A voting method where voters rank candidates in order of preference. If no candidate receives a majority, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and their votes are redistributed based on second preferences, continuing until a majority is reached.

**Spoiled Ballot** – A ballot that has been deliberately marked incorrectly or defaced, often as a form of protest. It is not counted in the election results.

**Ticket** – a ballot created by newspapers or political parties for their preferred candidates.

**Treating –** a name given to offering food, drink, and even cash in exchange for votes.

**Undervote** – Happens when a voter does not select any option in a given race or contest, either intentionally or by mistake.

**Viva voce** – A method of voting in which individuals verbally declare their vote in public. Common in early elections, this method was vulnerable to intimidation and corruption.

# CHAPTER 3: THE VOTERS

## Chapter Outline




*Photo by Mikhail Nilov, Pexels License.*

# 3.0 Introduction

In democratic political systems, the right to vote is one of the more fundamental democratic rights. If voters are to elect their representative in some type of responsible government, then participation in those elections must be broad enough to convey legitimacy to the elected government. For example, in a system where only ten percent of the population chooses a leader, they might be seen as illegitimate by the remaining 90%. Mass participation through voting is a way of ensuring the legitimacy of the elected leadership. The leaders are, ostensibly, accountable to members of the political community through the electoral process. However, as a precondition for holding democratic elections, a determination must be made about who is able to vote. This right to vote is known as the **franchise**.

## Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Recall the common requirements for accessing the franchise
- Describe how voting rights have evolved to be more inclusive
- Explain how barriers to voting are still employed today

## Things we need to know

In this chapter, you can expect to encounter the following terms/concepts.

- Franchise
- Suffrage
- Disenfranchise
- Compulsory voting

# 3.1 Voting Eligibility Criteria

Around the world, many countries have a set of minimum criteria that must be met for a person to be eligible to vote. Some of the more common criteria are minimum voting ages, citizenship status, and residency requirements (Blais et al., 2001).

## Age Requirements

Many countries have a minimum age threshold for participating in elections. Age minimums are also common for accessing other legal rights and entitlements, and they are seen as representative of the competence and maturity required for participation in the civic community. In many countries around the world, the most common minimum voting age is 18 (Blais et al., 2001), although there are some exceptions. Table 3.1.1 compares the legal voting age in several countries.

**Table 3.1.1. (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-a)**

| Country | Voting Age |
|---|---|
| Brazil | 16 |
| Canada | 18 |
| The United States of America | 18 |
| Cameroon | 20 |
| Taiwan | 20 |
| Singapore | 21 |

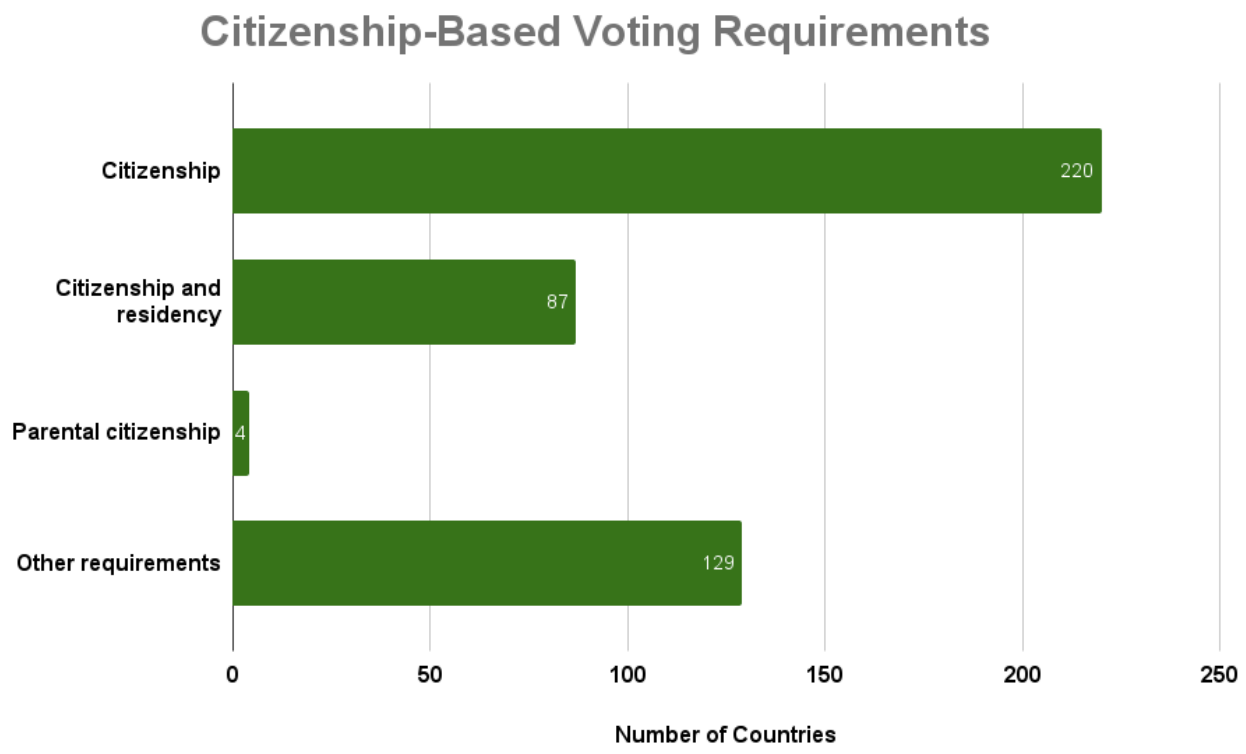
### Should the voting age be lowered?

While 18 years is a common minimum voting age, several jurisdictions allow voting at the age of 16. In Brazil, voters may cast votes at 16 (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-a). Additionally, twenty American states allow 17-year-olds to cast votes in primary elections for the selection of candidates (Ballotpedia, n.d.-a). In Europe, several countries allow 16-year-olds to vote in European Parliamentary elections (NPR, 2024). Extending the franchise to younger voters might help improve voter turnout; however, some evidence from Austria suggests that younger voters are more inclined to vote for extreme candidates and parties (Bronner & Ifkovits, 2019).

## Citizenship Requirements

In addition to age requirements, many countries also enforce residency requirements or citizenship requirements for voting. A citizenship requirement extends the franchise to citizens only. Legal permanent residents, temporary workers, and visiting students are excluded (Blais et al., 2001). There may also be an extension of absentee voting rights to citizens who are living abroad, working abroad, or deployed in the

military. Several countries impose additional burdens beyond citizenship, including a minimum period of residence (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-a). Figure 3.1.1 illustrates the different citizenship and residency requirements.




*Citizenship-Based Voting Requirements (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-a).*

Image Description
Horizontal bar chart titled “Citizenship-Based Voting Requirements”. The chart displays the number of countries with various citizenship-related requirements for voting. The four categories and their corresponding values are:

- Citizenship: 220 countries (longest bar)
- Citizenship and residency: 87 countries
- Parental citizenship: 4 countries (shortest bar)
- Other requirements: 129 countries

The x-axis is labelled “Number of Countries” and has a scale ranging approximately from 0 to 250. Each bar is dark green with the count displayed inside the bar. The overall layout emphasizes that most countries require basic citizenship to vote.

## Franchise Restrictions

Over time, there has been a gradual expansion of the right to vote as many countries have adopted a more

inclusive approach to the franchise (Blais et al., 2001); however, throughout history, the right to vote was severely restricted. In the next sections, we will examine how voting rights have evolved to be more inclusive.

# 3.2 Expanding Voting Rights

In Canada, early election rules varied by colony, but property restrictions were common. In most provinces, only men who owned a given amount of property were eligible to vote.

Several jurisdictions also imposed religious requirements. Catholics, Jews, and Quakers were among the religious groups barred from voting (Courtney, 2020). After Confederation, voting requirements were determined within each province, but most restricted voting to British male property owners who were over 21 (Courtney, 2020).

### Historical Barriers to Voting in Canada

- *Racial Barriers:* Indigenous people in Canada were banned from voting. Black Canadians have formal voting rights, but they were subject to discrimination, and they were effectively barred from voting by economic barriers (Courtney, 2020).
- *Economic Barriers:* Requirements that voters own property were designed to exclude the poor from voting (McRae, 2019).
- *Religious Barriers:* Quakers, Catholics, Jews, and other non-Christians were all barred from voting at different periods throughout Canada's history (Courtney, 2020).
- *Occupational Barriers:* Judges, election officials, and some government officials were often ineligible to vote (Elections Canada, n.d.-a).
- *Geographic Barriers:* Distance effectively restricted voting opportunities, since in many electoral districts there was only one voting location, which may have meant several days of travel for voters who weren't located nearby (McRae, 2019).

## Women's Suffrage

**1893 New Zealand**

**1906 Finland**

Most of the barriers discussed were related to male voters. Women could not vote. The movement to extend voting rights to women was known as the **suffrage movement**. In 19th-century England, women began to advocate for voting rights. The movement slowly gained traction, and in 1867, Parliament voted on a measure that would grant women the right to vote (BBC Bitesize, n.d). It was defeated. The failed vote galvanized the women's suffrage and formal advocacy organizations were formed.

**1918 Canada**

**1920 United States**

**1944 France**

**1947 Mexico**

**1971 Switzerland**

**1972 Bangladesh**

**1976 Portugal**

*Figure 3.2.1. Dates when women were granted the right to vote in select countries. (The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), n.d.)*

One suffragette in particular, Emmeline Pankhurst, advocated for a more militant brand of activism that included protests, property destruction, storming Parliament, and even chaining themselves to the gates of Buckingham Palace (UK Parliament, n.d.-a)

*Emmeline Pankhurst getting arrested outside Buckingham Palace in 1914. "Q 81486" by United Kingdom Government, from Imperial War Museum, Public Domain.*

The influence of Pankhurst and other suffragettes quickly spread to North America. In pre-confederation Canada, there were some instances of women voting, but by 1867, Women were formally excluded from voting (Elections Canada, n.d.-a). Nellie McClung and Dr. Emily Stowe were early advocates for women's voting rights in Canada. Stowe founded the Toronto Women's Literary Club in 1877, which eventually became the Toronto Women's Suffrage Association. In Manitoba, activist Nellie McClung helped secure the right to vote in the province.

In America, women's rights activists were also influenced by Pankhurst and the British suffragettes (Kirby, 2020). Activists such as Susan B. Anthony worked to expand economic and political rights for women, culminating in the ratification of the 19th Amendment, which granted the vote to women.

*Emmeline Pankhurst meets with Nellie McClung in Edmonton, Alberta. Image by McDermid Studio, Public Domain.*

Despite being granted legal voting rights, there are still legal, economic, or practical mechanisms that limit full participation in elections. We will examine a few of them in the next section.

# 3.3 Disenfranchisement

Over time, there has been a global trend to expand the **franchise**. Voting rights have been extended to groups who did not have legal voting rights, including Judges and people with mental disabilities in Canada, or opening the vote to 16-year-olds in some European countries. Despite the trend, there are still areas where voting rights are being restricted. When a person's voting rights are denied, restricted or removed, it is known as **disenfranchisement**.

## Incarceration

One group of people who generally do not have the right to vote are prison inmates. Many countries do not allow people to vote while incarcerated, and some countries even deny voting rights after a prison term has ended (Rottinghaus & Baldwin, 2007). There is significant variation between countries.

---

### Prisoners can vote

Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, and Sweden are examples of countries that allow prisoners to vote (Taylor et al., 2014).

### Some prisoners can vote

Australia, Germany, Japan and The Netherlands are a few countries that allow some prisoners to vote. Voting might be allowed (or denied) depending on the length of the sentence of the type of offence (Taylor et al., 2014). For example, most prisoners can vote in Germany, but not those accused of 'ideological or anarchistic' offences (Rottinghaus & Baldwin, 2007).

### Prisoners can't vote

Brazil, India, Poland, and the United Kingdom are a few of the countries that do not allow prisoners to vote (Taylor et al., 2014).

### Post incarceration restrictions

The most restrictive practices are found in countries that do not allow prisoners to vote, but they also remove voting rights after the prison term is complete. Columbia, Finland, Mexico, and New Zealand are countries that restrict or remove voting rights post-incarceration (Taylor et al., 2014).

### Example: The United States – Disenfranchisement for Convictions

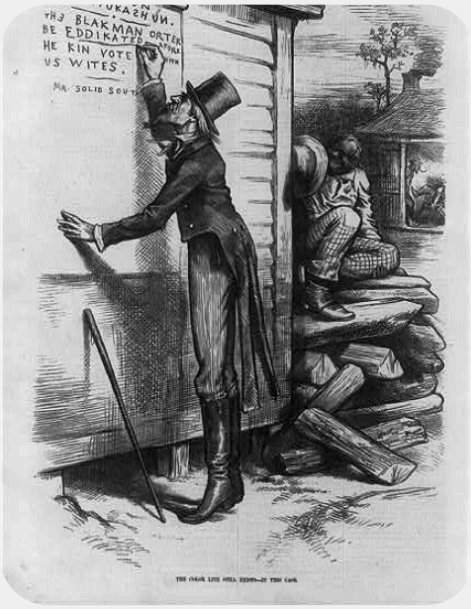
The United States has one of the harshest systems of post-incarceration disenfranchisement. While individual states have some discretion in restricting the franchise after release from prison, 48 states have laws that disenfranchise people with felony convictions (Porter et al., 2021). According to The Sentencing Project, felony disenfranchisement laws have left over 4.4 million Americans unable to vote (Porter et al., 2021). The practice has roots in the country's history of slavery. In the post-Civil War period, the Fifteenth Amendment, which extended voting rights to black Americans, was written narrowly to allow southern states to pursue other mechanisms for disenfranchisement, including the criminal justice system (Keyssar, 2009).

## Registration Requirements

Another method of limiting access to the franchise is to impose burdens on citizens when registering to vote. Most election administrators require voters to prove their identification, often with some type of government-issued identification. These requirements can be crafted to be broad and inclusive, or they can be narrowly tailored to exclude specific groups or classes of people. In the United States, most states accept driver's licenses or passports as valid forms of identification, but there is variation by state. For example, Michigan accepts student ID cards as a valid form of identification. Texas does not accept student ID cards, but a handgun license is considered sufficient (Voteriders, n.d).

## Example: The United States – Restrictive Registration Practices

In the aftermath of the Civil War, southern states enacted literacy tests, grandfather clauses, and other requirements intended to disenfranchise Black voters in Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi. Literacy tests were long and detailed exams on local and national politics, history, and more. They were often administered arbitrarily, with more African Americans required to take them than White people. Poll taxes required voters to pay a fee to vote. Grandfather clauses exempted individuals from taking literacy tests or paying poll taxes if they or their fathers or grandfathers had been permitted to vote prior to a certain point in time. While the Supreme Court determined that grandfather clauses were unconstitutional in 1915, states continued to use poll taxes and literacy tests to deter potential voters from registering. States also ignored instances of violence and intimidation against African Americans wanting to register or vote.




*Editorial cartoon for Harper's Weekly by unknown author, Public Domain.*

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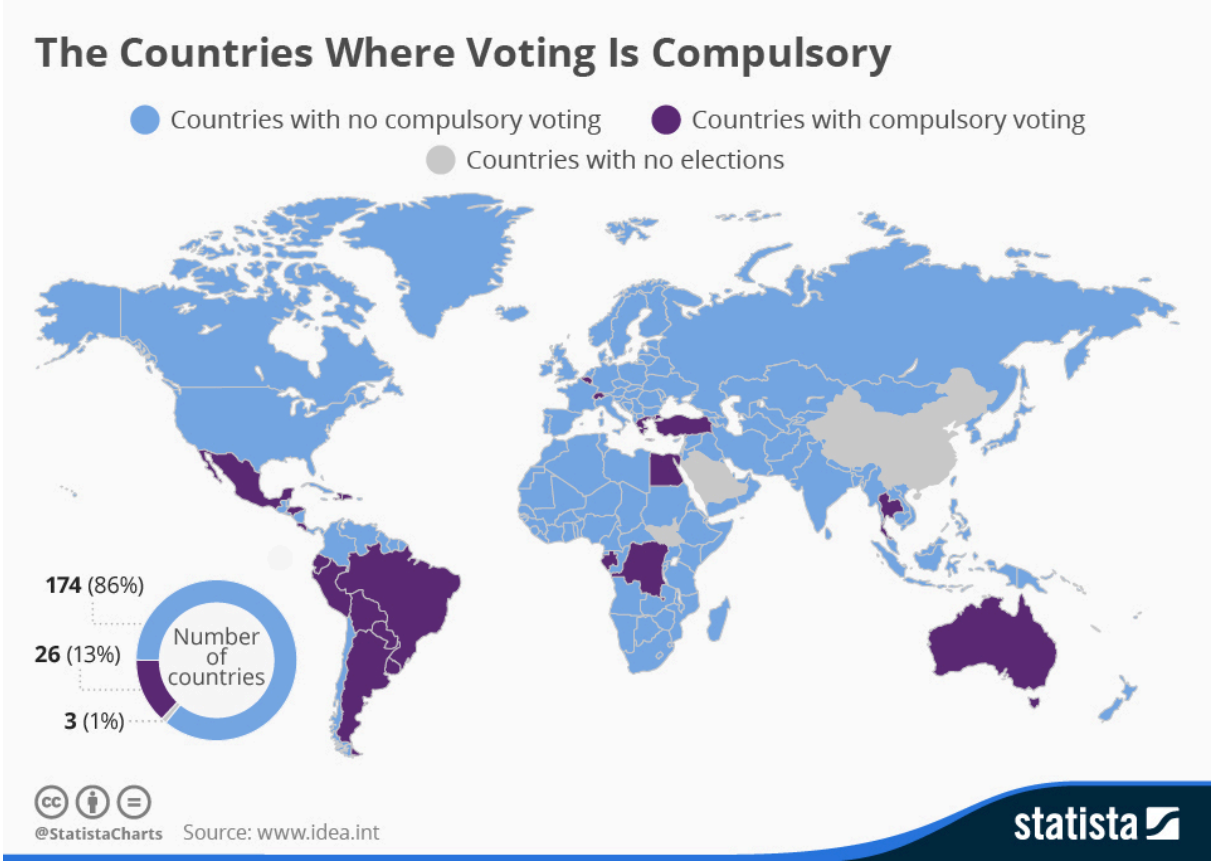
# 3.4 Compulsory Voting

Arend Lijphart (1997) suggests that democratic elections suffer from a problem of unequal turnout. Since voting is more common among citizens with higher incomes and higher levels of education, political systems will be biased toward their interests. To ensure more equal representation in government, **compulsory voting** (CV) can be a mechanism for ensuring a more representative electorate (Lijphart, 1997).

## Countries with compulsory voting

According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), there are 27 countries that enforce some type of compulsory voting, including Italy, Belgium, Greece, and Australia (IDEA, n.d).




*"The Countries where Voting is Compulsory" by Niall McCarthy for Statista, data from IDEA International. CC BY-ND 4.0*

Image Description

A world map titled "The Countries Where Voting Is Compulsory" shows three categories of countries:

Light blue for countries with no compulsory voting (174 countries, 86%),

Dark purple for countries with compulsory voting (26 countries, 13%),

Grey for countries with no elections (3 countries, 1%).

Notable countries with compulsory voting (dark purple) include Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador, Singapore, and parts of Central Africa. Countries like China and Saudi Arabia are marked in grey, indicating no elections. The map includes a pie chart visualizing the number of countries per category. Source: idea.int via Statista.

Under a system of compulsory voting, citizens are required to show up at a polling place. They aren't required to cast a vote – some may choose to spoil their ballot – but showing up is considered a civic duty (IDEA, n.d).

## Does it work?

While CV does indeed increase turnout, it may not lead to more meaningful expressions of preferences. For instance, One analysis from Chile found that the implementation of compulsory voting raised turnout in traditionally low-turnout regions; however, the boost in turnout also increased the number of invalid votes (Contreras & Morales, 2024) which suggests voters may be showing up at the polls as required, yet failing to cast meaningful votes.

## What's the penalty?

Penalizing people who don't vote might seem harsh, but the penalties aren't that severe. Most countries that use CV impose a fine as a penalty for noncompliance, and the amount of the fine is often compared to a parking ticket (Taylor et al., 2014).

# 3.5 Chapter Summary

## Real Life Example: Disenfranchisement in the American South

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s in America, many southern states enacted policies to restrict the voting rights of black Americans. Many states employed literacy tests as barriers to voting. However, the tests weren't actually intended to assess literacy; rather, they were used as a tool to prevent black citizens from casting votes. Below are a few sample questions from a test that was likely used in Louisiana.

*Photograph by Thomas J. O'Halloran, Public Domain.*

*Do what you are told to do in each statement, nothing more, nothing less. Be careful, as one wrong answer denotes failure of the test.*

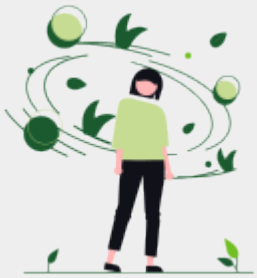
1. Draw a line around the number or letter of this sentence
2. Draw a line under the last word in this line
3. Cross out the longest word in this line
4. Draw a line around the shortest word in this line
5. Circle the first, first letter of the alphabet in this line
6. In the space below, draw three circles, one inside (engulfed by) the other
7. Above the letter X make a small cross

(Onion, 2013)

## How would you do?

- Could you answer any of the questions correctly?
- Would you feel confident in your answers?

If the questions seem confusing, that is by design. The (white) poll clerk would ultimately determine whether the answers were correct.



## Chapter Summary

In this Chapter,

- Voting is fundamental to democratic legitimacy, but eligibility is governed by criteria such as age, citizenship, and residency, collectively known as the franchise.
- Most countries set the minimum voting age at 18, though some allow younger voters; lowering the voting age may improve turnout, but could lead to increased support for extremist candidates.
- Citizenship requirements often exclude non-citizens such as temporary residents and international students, with some countries also imposing additional residency rules.
- Historically, voting rights were restricted by property ownership, religion, race, gender, and geography; these exclusions were used to disenfranchise large portions of the population.
- Women's suffrage movements in the UK and North America, led by figures like Emmeline Pankhurst and Nellie McClung, fought for and gradually secured voting rights for women across many countries.
- Disenfranchisement persists today through incarceration laws, with varying policies worldwide; the U.S. enforces especially harsh restrictions on felons, both during and after imprisonment.
- Voter registration laws, particularly in the U.S., have historically and currently functioned to exclude marginalized groups through ID requirements, literacy tests, and other discriminatory practices.
- Compulsory voting, used in countries like Australia and Belgium, raises voter turnout and aims to equalize representation, though it may also increase the number of invalid or protest votes.

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OpenAI. (2025, May 27th). ChatGPT. [Large language model]. https://www.chatgpt.com Prompt: Can you please summarize the passage into 8 key points with no additional bullets? *Edited & Reviewed by author.*

## Key Terms

- **Compulsory voting** – A legal requirement for eligible citizens to participate in elections. Under this system, individuals must attend a polling place on election day and may face penalties (such as fines) if they fail to do so, even if they choose not to cast a vote.
- **Disenfranchise** – To deny or restrict someone's right to vote. Disenfranchisement can occur through legal exclusions (e.g., due to incarceration) or structural barriers (e.g., voter ID laws).
- **Franchise** – The legal right to vote in public elections. It determines who is eligible to participate in the electoral process.
- **Suffrage Movement** – The right to vote in political elections. Often used in historical contexts to describe movements, such as women's suffrage, that fought to extend this right to excluded groups.

# CHAPTER 4: ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

## Chapter Outline



*Photo by Edmond Dantès, Pexels License.*

# 4.0 Introduction

Who is the winner? In the 2016 American presidential election, Hillary Clinton received over 2.8 million more votes than her opponent, Donald Trump; however, Trump was declared the winner and inaugurated as the 45th President of the United States. How did that happen? The United States of America uses an arcane method of determining a winner of their Presidential elections, and within their system, it's possible that the winner isn't the candidate with the most votes.

A country's method of determining a winner is known as their **electoral system**. In this chapter, we will compare the two most common configurations of systems: **majoritarian** and **proportional**. We will also examine the peculiar system used in American presidential elections, which doesn't fit into either category. We will conclude the chapter by looking at other election variants that are used for collective decision-making.

## Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Describe the decision rules and thresholds used to turn voter preferences into seats in a legislature
- Compare the characteristics of majoritarian and proportional systems
- Explain the advantages and disadvantages of different electoral systems

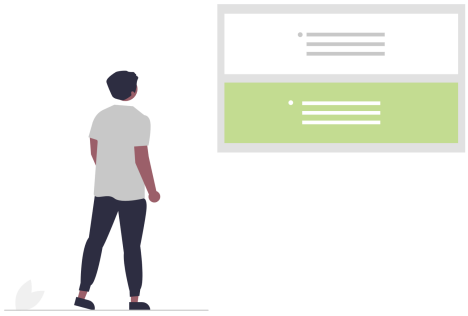
## Things we need to know

In this chapter, you can expect to encounter the following terms/concepts.

- Electoral system
- Majoritarian
- Proportional
- Plurality
- Referendum
- Recall
- Threshold

# 4.1 Types of Systems

Comparing elections involves examining the districts, the ballots, the franchise and the formula. The term formula refers to the mathematical calculation required to translate voter preferences into a representative government. This could mean seats in a legislature, or it could be a formula for electing a head of state, such as a president. A country's electoral formula is more commonly known as an **electoral system**.



The term electoral system is a bit of a misnomer. Rather than a single process or institution, an electoral system is a complex system of interconnected rules that determines:

- The number of candidates election
- The method voters use to make their choice
- The process of counting votes
- The **threshold** for winning. (Blais & Bol, 2023)

Each potential option presents trade-offs. Some systems might use single-member districts while others have multi-member districts. Some systems use complex ballots that require voters to select multiple options across several contests. Other ballots, such as Canada's, are more intuitive. The number of candidates and the type of ballot are related to the choice of system. The elements of an electoral system are interconnected.

For each of those criteria, there are different options available, and the choice of electoral system involves making explicit judgments about the purpose of the election. The purpose might be to identify clear winners and losers, or it might be trying to represent the voters' preferences as closely as possible (Taylor et al., 2014). The goal might also be to have a system that is easy to use and quick to provide results. When comparing methods of electing a parliament, congress, or legislature, we can group the different systems into two broad categories: **majoritarian** and proportional.

# 4.2 Majoritarian Systems

According to Taylor et al. (2014), “Majoritarian systems reflect the premise that elections should have clear winners and losers” (pg 119). As the name implies, a majoritarian system seeks to identify the candidates within each electoral district that have the most support. Each district corresponds to a seat in the legislature, and each one is contested by two or more parties. A single winner is determined based on a candidate meeting the winning threshold.

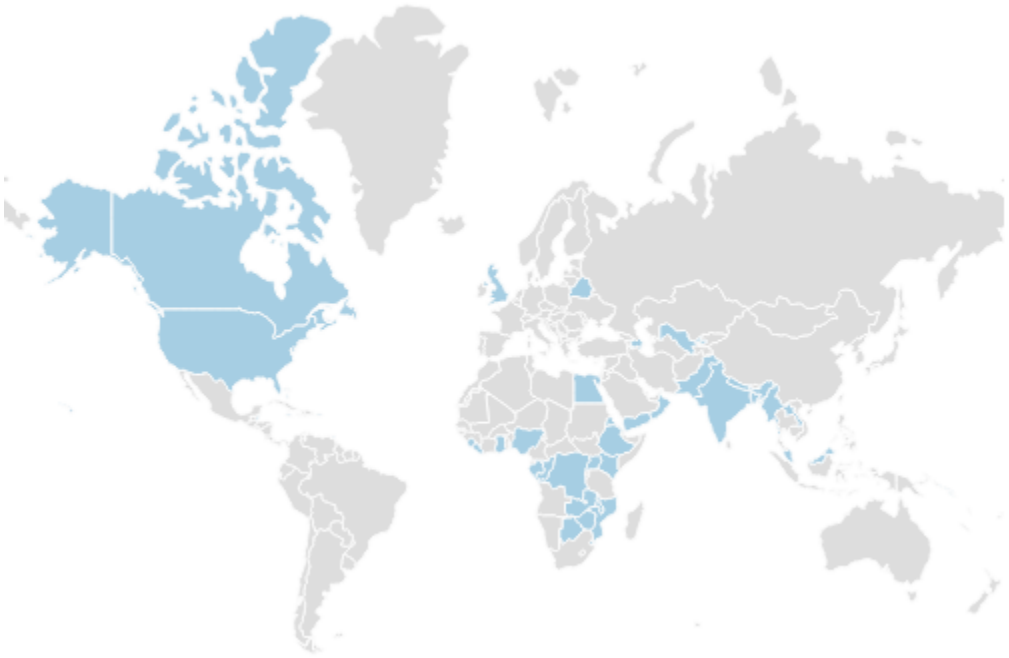
### Decision Rules

The winning candidate is determined by a given decision rule (Munger & Munger, 2015). The decision rule determines the threshold for winning.

- *Plurality* – candidate with the most votes wins.
- *Majority* – A candidate must receive over 50% of the votes to win
- *Supermajority* – A candidate must receive more votes than a simple majority, sometimes 60% of the votes, two-thirds, or even 75%.

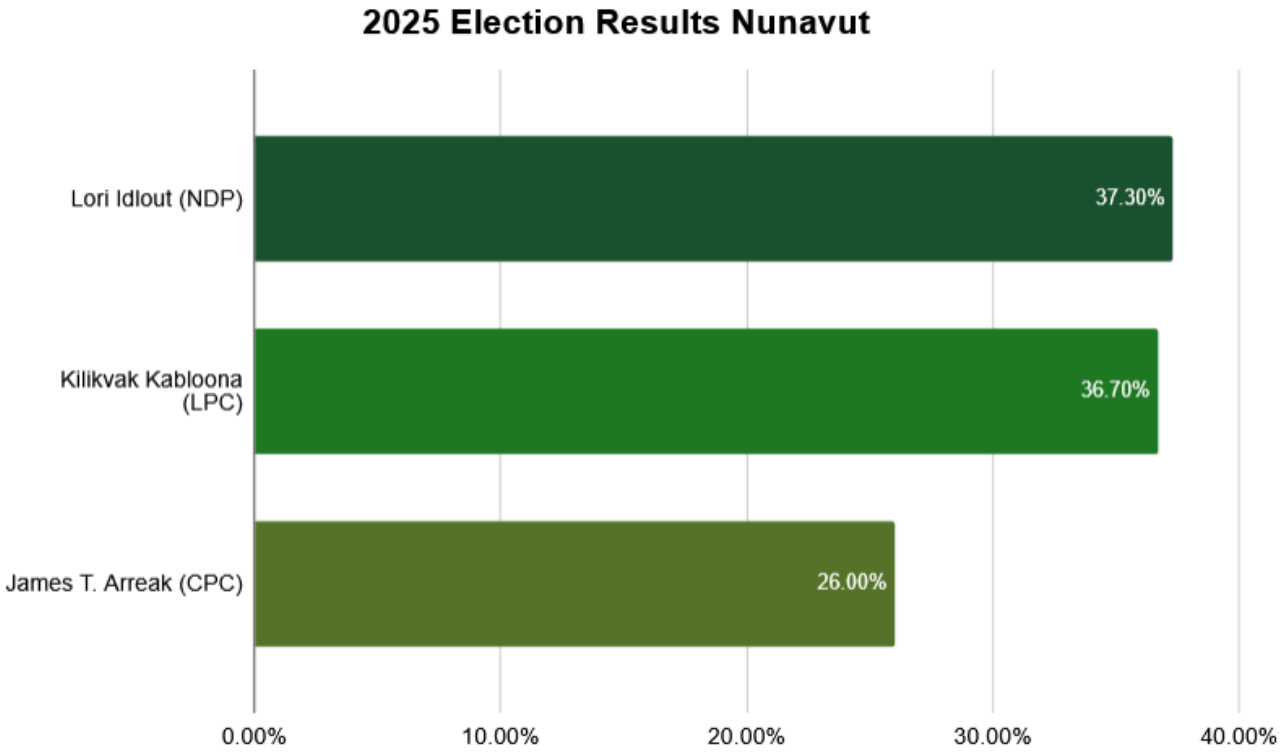
## Plurality Systems

In a **plurality** electoral system, a candidate wins their district by getting the most votes. Canada uses a type of plurality system called Single-Member Plurality (SMP). The term single-member signifies a district magnitude of 1, and plurality tells us about the winning threshold. One candidate will be elected from the district, and the candidate with the most votes is the winner. Sixty-nine countries use some version of a plurality system:



*Countries Where Plurality Systems are Used. "Plurality (FPTP)" by ACE Project, FDEd (CAN).*

Plurality systems are also called *first past the post (FPTP)* systems. The table below displays FPTP election results from the Nunavut electoral district in the 2025 Canadian federal election.




*(Data: Elections Canada, 2025).*

The winning candidate from the NDP won the riding with 37% of the votes (and by only 41 votes!). In this case, the winning candidate received a plurality of the votes, while a majority of the voters, over 62%, preferred someone else.

## Is plurality enough?

Similar to the results in Nunavut, candidates in plurality systems can often win elections despite over half of voters preferring someone else. To avoid this, countries may opt to use a **single-member majority system (SMM)**. To win an election, a candidate must achieve a majority of support in the district instead of simply getting the most votes (O'Neal, 1993). This is easy in a district with only two parties, but when there are more than two candidates, a different mechanism must be used.

## Two Ballot System

A two-ballot system or **two-round system** uses two separate elections to determine a winner in each district. The first election will be open to multiple candidates (O'Neal, 1993). If no candidate earns a majority of votes, then a second round of voting is held. On the second ballot, qualifying candidates (typically the top two) appear on the ballot, ensuring the winner has a majority of support. This is sometimes called a *run-off* election.

### Example: France

France is one of 17 countries that use a two-round system for parliamentary elections. In the 2024 Legislative elections, two rounds of voting were held on 30 June and one week later on July 7 to elect 577 members of the national assembly.

## Alternate Vote

Instead of holding two rounds of voting, the same result can be achieved by asking voters to rank their choices. This is called an **alternate vote (AV) system** (O'Neal, 1993). If none of the candidates receive an absolute majority, the last-place finisher is eliminated, and the second-choice votes from those ballots are applied to the total. The process continues until a candidate receives a majority of the votes. Australia uses an AV system for its Parliamentary elections. This system is also called *ranked-choice voting (RCV), preferential ballot, or instant runoff voting (IRV).* The terms can be used interchangeably (O'Neal, 1993).

### Example: London, Ontario

For its 2018 municipal elections, London, Ontario, used a system of preferential voting to elect a mayor and 14 members of City Council. The initial implementation was expensive, and the process took longer to count votes and report results due to the calculations required to reallocate votes after each round (Kurs, 2020).

# 4.3 Proportional Systems

While plurality systems are easy for voters to understand and quick to report results, they don't always provide an accurate representation of voter preferences. Plurality systems emphasize the importance of winning an electoral district, but it does not consider the total number of votes, called the **popular vote**. For example, in the 2021 Canadian Federal election, the Liberal Party won the most seats despite receiving fewer votes than the Conservative Party.

**Table 4.3.1 2021 Canadian Federal Election Results (Data source: Wikipedia, 2025)**

| Party | Seats Won | Popular Vote (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Liberal | 160 | 32.62 |
| Conservative | 119 | 33.74 |
| Bloc Quebecois | 32 | 7.64 |
| New Democratic Party | 25 | 17.82 |
| Greens | 2 | 2.33 |
| People's Party | 0 | 4.94 |

To better reflect the overall preferences of the population, a system of **proportional representation (PR)** can be used. In a PR system, the percentage of votes a party receives roughly translates into the percentage of seats they win in the legislature. For example, if a party gets about 40% of the votes, it should get about 40% of the seats. **Proportional** systems are the most common worldwide, with 87 countries using a form of proportional representation.



*Countries Using List Proportional Representation Systems. "List Proportional Representation" by ACE Project, FDEd (CAN).*

## Who wins the seats?

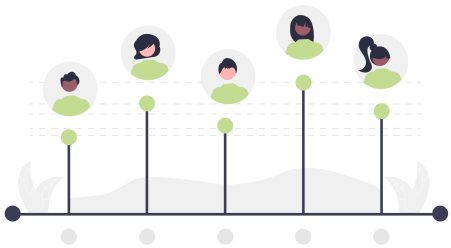
Without the geographic link central to plurality systems, systems of proportional representation use multimember districts. They also use **party lists** to allocate seats in the legislature. These lists can take two forms.

## Closed List Systems

One variant of PR uses a closed list system (Blais & Bol, 2023). In this system, each party publishes a party list of candidates who are standing for election. This list includes candidates who will win seats in the legislature. For example, if a party wins twenty seats, the top twenty names from the party list will win seats in the legislature.

## Open List Systems

In an open list PR system, voters can cast a preferential vote by ranking the candidates on the ballot. This is sometimes called *Single Transferable Vote (STV) or panachage* (O'Neal, 1993). Seats in the legislature are allocated to the top vote getters on each party list.



### Minimum Thresholds

To prevent a fractured legislature dominated by small, often extremist, parties, some PR systems will have a minimum **threshold** to qualify for legislative seats. For example, in Sweden, a party must win at least 4% of the popular vote to be awarded seats in the legislature (Blais & Bol, 2023).

# 4.4 Comparing Systems

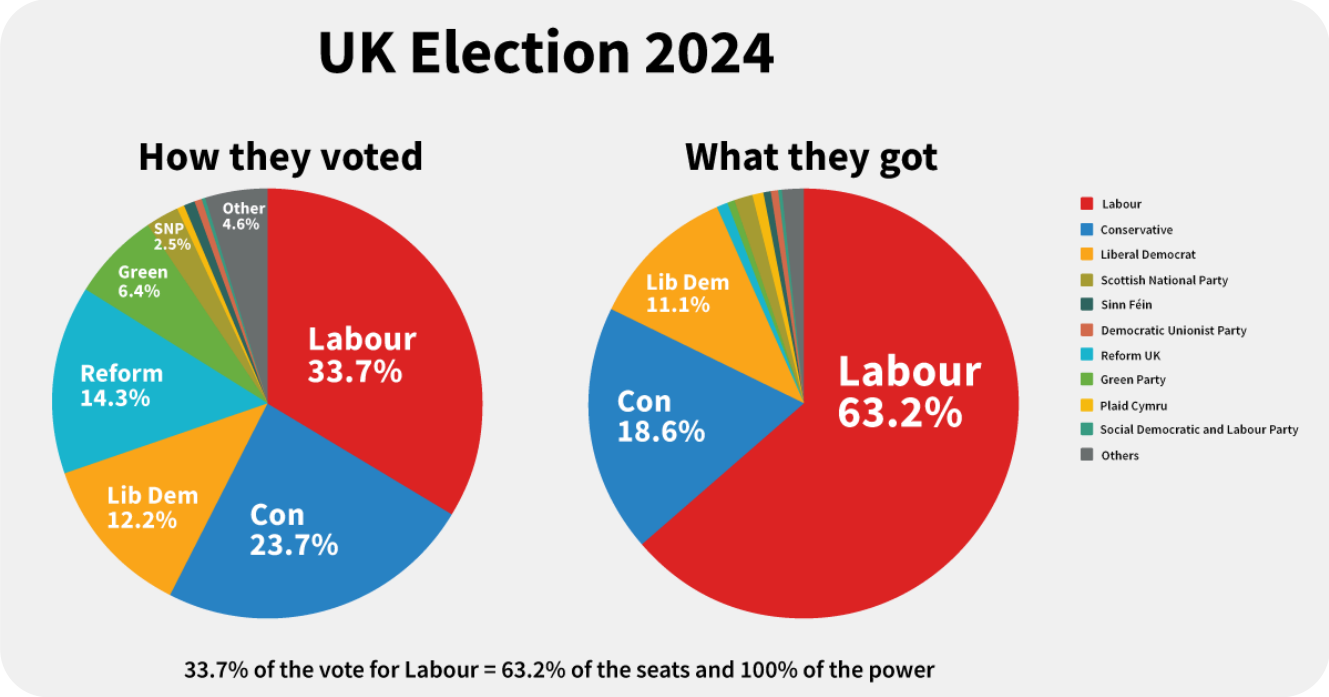
There are advantages and disadvantages to each variant of electoral system. Their respective features can produce different types of governments, they might have different degrees of representativeness, or they might pose difficulty in calculating the results.

## Composition of the Legislature

Systems that use **plurality** election systems tend to produce two dominant parties, while proportional systems encourage the formation of smaller parties (Rhodes et al., 2006). Consequently, plurality systems tend to produce governments where one party controls a majority of seats, called a **majority government**. This is in contrast to proportional systems that tend to see many smaller parties represented in the legislature. It becomes less likely that a single party will control the legislature, which requires the parties to work together and form a partnership, known as a **coalition government** (Ferland, 1993). These are more common in proportional systems and tend to be less stable than majority governments (Miljan, 2018).

## Representativeness

With plurality systems' emphasis on identifying clear winners in single-member districts, there is sometimes a disconnect with the popular vote. According to the interest group Fair Vote Canada, FPTP systems like Canada and the United Kingdom tend to produce unrepresentative results. In the 2024 UK elections, the Labour Party won over 60% of the seats with less than 34% of the vote.




*"UK Election 2024" by Fair Vote Canada, FDEd (CAN).*

Image Description
Two pie charts titled "UK Election 2024" compare vote share with seat share among political parties. The left chart, "How they voted," shows the percentage of votes each party received: Labour (33.7%), Conservative (23.7%), Reform UK (14.3%), Liberal Democrat (12.2%), Green (6.4%), SNP (2.5%), and Others (4.6%). The right chart, "What they got," displays the corresponding share of parliamentary seats: Labour (63.2%), Conservative (18.6%), Liberal Democrat (11.1%), with other parties having significantly smaller segments. A caption at the bottom highlights the disproportionality: "33.7% of the vote for Labour = 63.2% of the seats and 100% of the power."
Additionally, the Reform Party earned more votes than the Liberal Democrats, but the Lib Dems won 72 seats compared to the 5 seats won by Reform (BBC News, 2024). A PR system would produce a legislature more in line with the preferences of voters.

## Reporting Results

FPTP systems like Canada's are simple to use and quick to count. Determining control of the legislature is rarely more complicated than counting the votes and reporting the results. Conversely, systems that use preferential ballots or proportional representation can take several days to report the results (Blais & Bol, 2023).

## Best of Both Worlds?

Is there a better way of balancing the benefits of each system without the tradeoffs? Perhaps. A **Mixed Member Proportional (MMP)** system combines elements of FPTP and plurality systems. With a mixed system, voters cast two votes, one for a local representative (typically in a single-member district) and a second vote for a political party. The party votes are allocated to political parties in an attempt to bring the overall election

results more in line with the popular vote (Blais & Bol, 2023). New Zealand and Germany use variants of mixed systems.

### Changing the System

When a country wants to change some aspect of its electoral system, it is engaged in **electoral reform**. For example, in 1996, New Zealand changed its electoral system to a Mixed-Member Proportional (MMP) system after a lengthy consultation period (Simpson, 2022).

# 4.5 Other Types of Elections

Thus far, the electoral systems examined are used for electing members of a legislature. In this section, we will review how elections might be used to choose presidents, to respond to questions of interest, or even to remove elected officials from office.

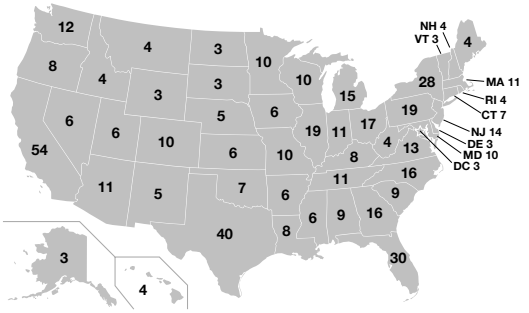
## Electing Presidents

Similar to legislative elections, direct elections for president can use a plurality or majority decision rule, or they can do something else entirely. South Korea uses a plurality election for selecting a president (Blais & Bol, 2023). France uses a majority run-off system in which a first round of elections is held with multiple candidates. If no Candidate wins a majority of votes, a second round is held with the top two candidates (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-c).

## America: Something Completely Different

Presidential elections in the United States use an indirect method of electing presidents, called the **Electoral College**. Each state has a given number of electoral votes to allocate, and on election day, the voters in each state decide which candidate should get their votes.

Most states allocate their votes on a winner-take-all basis called the unit rule. For example, the candidate receiving the most votes in Texas will receive all of the State's 40 electoral votes. Only two states, Maine and Nebraska, allocate their votes on a proportional basis (Ballotpedia, n.d.-b).




*Map Showing Electoral College Votes for Each State. "Electoral College 2028" by Kingofthedead, Public Domain.*

### Confused?

If the American system sounds confusing, it is. For the sake of simplicity, think of the Electoral College as a points system. In practical terms, a candidate must accumulate 270 points to win the Presidency. That may be the easiest way to understand Presidential elections in America.

### Electoral College Inversions

It is possible for a candidate to win the electoral college without getting the most votes. This is called an *Electoral College Inversion,* and it has happened twice since 2000.

- 2000 Election: George W Bush won the electoral college vote, yet Al Gore received approximately 540,000 more votes nationally.
- 2016 Election: Donald J Trump won the electoral college vote, yet Hillary Clinton received 2.5 million more votes nationally.

Inversions are more likely when the national popular vote margin is close (Geruso et al., 2022)

## Recall Elections

In a **recall** election, voters can vote to remove someone from office. In some countries, recall elections can only be held if specific criteria are met, for example, corruption or impropriety (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-b). In the United States, 39 states have recall provisions allowing voters to recall state-level officials, local officials, and even judges (Ballotpedia, n.d.-b)

Typically, in a recall process, a petition is filed to initiate a recall vote. If a specific threshold of signatures is reached, the recall election can proceed.

## Referendum

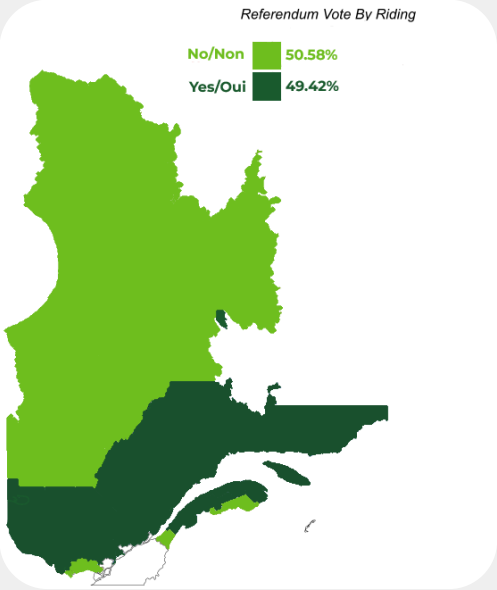
A **referendum** is a type of **direct democracy** that allows the public to vote directly on a law, Constitutional amendment, or other question of significance (Taylor et al., 2014). Switzerland, a country with a tradition of participatory direct democracy, holds several referendums in a given year (Boyd, 2010).

## Should Quebec Leave Canada?

In the 1990s, separatist sentiment was rising in Québec. The province's Parti Québécois government held a referendum to seek a mandate for secession (Gall, 2015). Voters were asked,

> *"Do you agree that Québec should become sovereign, after having made a formal offer to Canada for a new economic and political partnership, within the scope of the Bill respecting the future of Québec and of the agreement signed on 12 June 1995?"*

The confusing question resulted in a narrow victory for the no side, although a yes vote may not have resulted in separation from Canada. Unlike other jurisdictions, referendums in Québec are not binding; they are only advisory (Gow, 1996). In the aftermath of the referendum and a Supreme Court reference, the Canadian Government passed a law called the *Clarity Act*, stipulating that any future discussion on secession must follow a 'clear majority' vote on a 'clear question' (Gall, 2015).




*"Québec Referendum, 1995 – Results by Riding" by DrRandomFactor, CC BY-SA 4.0. Mods: Cropped, simplified, recoloured.*

# 4.6 Chapter Summary

## Real Life Example: California's Total Recall Election

In 2003, there was an organized effort to recall California Governor Gray Davis. Around this time, the collapse of the dot-com bubble and the State's energy crisis had largely been blamed on Governor Davis (Lawrence, 2003). California law stipulates that a recall election can be triggered if a petition is presented that has been signed by 12% of eligible voters from the previous election (Government of California, 2024). Once the petition has been verified, a recall election is triggered. The 2003 effort was successful due in part to a paid signature drive by a petition management company that was hired by the Governor's opponents (Ballotpedia, n.d.-b).

*"Arnold Schwarzenegger" by Georges Biard, CC BY-SA 3.0.*

The recall ballot contains two questions:

1. Shall GRAY DAVIS be recalled (removed) from the office of Governor?
2. Who would you pick as a replacement?

Unlike other state-level elections, which require primary elections to nominate candidates, recall elections are open to anyone! This election attracted politicians, journalists, adult film stars, and many others.

**Statewide Special Election**
**Orange County, California**
**October 07, 2003**

# OFFICIAL BALLOT

**Instruction Note:**

**HOW TO VOTE:**
- To vote, fill in and BLACKEN completely the rectangle to the left of any candidate or to the left of the word "YES" or "NO".
- Vote for only ONE of the 135 candidates, OR enter a write-in candidate in the space provided.
- Use only the special marking device provided. (Absentee voters should use a dark pen or a #2 pencil.)

**Shall GRAY DAVIS be recalled (removed) from the office of Governor?**

- ☐ YES
- ☐ NO

**Candidates to succeed GRAY DAVIS as Governor if he is recalled:**

**Vote for One**

- ☐ **B.E. SMITH** *Independent* - Lecturer
- ☐ **DAVID RONALD SAMS** *Republican* - Businessman/Producer/Writer
- ☐ **JAMIE ROSEMARY SAFFORD** *Republican* - Business Owner
- ☐ **LAWRENCE STEVEN STRAUSS** *Democratic* - Lawyer/Businessperson/Student
- ☐ **ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER** *Republican* - Actor/Businessman
- ☐ **GEORGE B. SCHWARTZMAN** *Independent* - Businessman
- ☐ **MIKE SCHMIER** *Democratic* - Attorney
- ☐ **DARRIN H. SCHEIDLE** *Democratic* - Businessman/Entrepreneur
- ☐ **BILL SIMON** *Republican* - Businessman
- ☐ **RICHARD J. SIMMONS** *Independent* - Attorney/Businessperson
- ☐ **CHRISTOPHER SPROUL** *Democratic* - Environmental Attorney
- ☐ **RANDALL D. SPRAGUE** *Republican* - Discrimination Complaint Investigator
- ☐ **TIM SYLVESTER** *Democratic* - Entrepreneur
- ☐ **STEPHEN L. KNAPP** *Republican* - Engineer
- ☐ **KELLY P. KIMBALL** *Democratic* - Business Executive
- ☐ **D.E. KESSINGER** *Democratic* - Paralegal/Property Manager
- ☐ **EDWARD "ED" KENNEDY** *Democratic* - Businessman/Educator
- ☐ **TREK THUNDER KELLY** *Independent* - Business Executive/Artist
- ☐ **JERRY KUNZMAN** *Independent* - Chief Executive Officer
- ☐ **PETER V. UEBERROTH** *Republican* - Businessman/Olympics Advisor
- ☐ **BILL PRADY** *Democratic* - Television Writer/Producer
- ☐ **DARIN PRICE** *Natural Law* - University Chemistry Instructor
- ☐ **GREGORY J. PAWLIK** *Republican* - Realtor/Businessman
- ☐ **LEONARD PADILLA** *Independent* - Law School President
- ☐ **RONALD JASON PALMIERI** *Democratic* - Gay Rights Attorney
- ☐ **CHARLES "CHUCK" PINEDA JR.** *Democratic* - State Hearing Officer
- ☐ **HEATHER PETERS** *Republican* - Mediator
- ☐ **ROBERT "BUTCH" DOLE** *Republican* - Small Business Owner
- ☐ **SCOTT DAVIS** *Independent* - Business Owner
- ☐ **RONALD J. FRIEDMAN** *Independent* - Physician
- ☐ **GENE FORTE** *Republican* - Executive Recruiter/Entrepreneur
- ☐ **DIANA FOSS** *Democratic* -
- ☐ **LORRAINE (ABNER ZURD) FONTANES** *Democratic* - Film Maker
- ☐ **WARREN FARRELL** *Democratic* - Fathers' Issues Author
- ☐ **DAN FEINSTEIN** *Democratic* -
- ☐ **LARRY FLYNT** *Democratic* - Publisher
- ☐ **DARRYL L. MOBLEY** *Independent* - Businessman/Entrepreneur
- ☐ **JEFFREY L. MOCK** *Republican* - Business Owner
- ☐ **BRUCE MARGOLIN** *Democratic* - Marijuana Legalization Attorney
- ☐ **GINO MARTORANA** *Republican* - Restaurant Owner
- ☐ **PAUL MARIANO** *Democratic* - Attorney
- ☐ **ROBERT C. MANNHEIM** *Democratic* - Retired Businessperson
- ☐ **FRANK A. MACALUSO, JR.** *Democratic* - Physician/Medical Doctor
- ☐ **PAUL "CHIP" MAILANDER** *Democratic* - Golf Professional
- ☐ **DENNIS DUGGAN MCMAHON** *Republican* - Banker
- ☐ **MIKE MCNEILLY** *Republican* - Artist
- ☐ **MIKE P. MCCARTHY** *Independent* - Used Car Dealer
- ☐ **BOB MCCLAIN** *Independent* - Civil Engineer
- ☐ **TOM MCCLINTOCK** *Republican* - State Senator
- ☐ **JONATHAN MILLER** *Democratic* - Small Business Owner
- ☐ **CARL A. MEHR** *Republican* - Businessman
- ☐ **SCOTT A. MEDNICK** *Democratic* - Business Executive
- ☐ **DORENE MUSILLI** *Republican* - Parent/Educator/Businesswoman
- ☐ **VAN VO** *Republican* - Radio Producer/Businessman
- ☐ **PAUL W. VANN** *Republican* - Financial Planner
- ☐ **JAMES M. VANDEVENTER, JR.** *Republican* - Salesman/Businessman
- ☐ **BILL VAUGHN** *Democratic* - Structural Engineer
- ☐ **MARC VALDEZ** *Democratic* - Air Pollution Scientist
- ☐ **MOHAMMAD ARIF** *Independent* - Businessman

**MEASURES SUBMITTED TO THE VOTERS**

**STATE**

**Proposition 53**

**FUNDS DEDICATED FOR STATE AND LOCAL INFRASTRUCTURE. LEGISLATIVE CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT.**

Generally dedicates up to 3% of General Fund revenues annually to fund state and local (excluding school and community college) infrastructure projects. Fiscal Impact: Dedication of General Fund revenues for state and local infrastructure. Potential transfers of $850 million in 2006-07, increasing to several billions of dollars in future years, under specified conditions.

- ☐ YES
- ☐ NO

**Proposition 54**

**CLASSIFICATION BY RACE, ETHNICITY, COLOR, OR NATIONAL ORIGIN. INITIATIVE CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT.**

Prohibits state and local governments from classifying any person by race, ethnicity, color, or national origin. Various exemptions apply. Fiscal Impact: The measure would not result in a significant fiscal impact on state and local governments.

- ☐ YES
- ☐ NO

**SAMPLE BALLOT**

- ☐ **JACK LOYD GRISHAM** *Independent* - Musician/Laborer
- ☐ **JAMES H. GREEN** *Democratic* - Firefighter Paramedic/Nurse
- ☐ **GARRETT GRUENER** *Democratic* - High-Tech Entrepreneur
- ☐ **GEROLD LEE GORMAN** *Democratic* - Engineer
- ☐ **RICH GOSSE** *Republican* - Educator
- ☐ **LEO GALLAGHER** *Independent* - Comedian
- ☐ **JOE GUZZARDI** *Democratic* - Teacher/Journalist
- ☐ **JON W. ZELLHOEFER** *Republican* - Energy Consultant/Entrepreneur
- ☐ **PAUL NAVE** *Democratic* - Businessman/Prizefighter/Father
- ☐ **ROBERT C. NEWMAN II** *Republican* - Psychologist/Farmer
- ☐ **BRIAN TRACY** *Independent* - Businessman/Consultant
- ☐ **A. LAVAR TAYLOR** *Democratic* - Tax Attorney
- ☐ **WILLIAM TSANGARES** *Republican* - Businessperson
- ☐ **PATRICIA G. TILLEY** *Independent* - Attorney
- ☐ **DIANE BEALL TEMPLIN** *American Independent* - Attorney/Realtor/Businesswoman
- ☐ **MARY "MARY CAREY" COOK** *Independent* - Adult Film Actress
- ☐ **GARY COLEMAN** *Independent* - Actor
- ☐ **TODD CARSON** *Republican* - Real Estate Developer
- ☐ **PETER MIGUEL CAMEJO** *Green* - Financial Investment Advisor
- ☐ **WILLIAM "BILL" S. CHAMBERS** *Republican* - Railroad Switchman/Brakeman
- ☐ **MICHAEL CHELI** *Independent* - Businessman
- ☐ **ROBERT CULLENBINE** *Democratic* - Retired Businessman
- ☐ **D. (LOGAN DARROW) CLEMENTS** *Republican* - Businessman
- ☐ **S. ISSA** *Republican* - Engineer
- ☐ **BOB LYNN EDWARDS** *Democratic* - Attorney
- ☐ **CALVIN Y. LOUIE** *Democratic* - CPA
- ☐ **DICK LANE** *Democratic* - Educator
- ☐ **TODD RICHARD LEWIS** *Independent* - Businessman
- ☐ **GARY LEONARD** *Democratic* - Photojournalist/Author
- ☐ **DAVID LAUGHING HORSE ROBINSON** *Democratic* - Tribal Chairman
- ☐ **NED ROSCOE** *Libertarian* - Cigarette Retailer
- ☐ **DANIEL C. "DANNY" RAMIREZ** *Democratic* - Businessman/Entrepreneur/Father
- ☐ **CHRISTOPHER RANKEN** *Democratic* - Planning Commissioner
- ☐ **JEFF RAINFORTH** *Independent* - Marketing Coordinator
- ☐ **KURT E. "TACHIKAZE" RIGHTMYER** *Independent* - Middleweight Sumo Wrestler
- ☐ **DANIEL W. RICHARDS** *Republican* - Businessman
- ☐ **KEVIN RICHTER** *Republican* - Information Technology Manager
- ☐ **REVA RENEE RENZ** *Republican* - Small Business Owner
- ☐ **SHARON RUSHFORD** *Independent* - Businesswomen
- ☐ **GEORGY RUSSELL** *Democratic* - Software Engineer
- ☐ **MICHAEL J. WOZNIAK** *Democratic* - Retired Police Officer
- ☐ **DANIEL WATTS** *Green* - College Student
- ☐ **NATHAN WHITECLOUD WALTON** *Independent* - Student
- ☐ **MAURICE WALKER** *Green* - Real Estate Appraiser
- ☐ **CHUCK WALKER** *Republican* - Business Intelligence Analyst
- ☐ **LINGEL H. WINTERS** *Democratic* - Consumer Business Attorney
- ☐ **C.T. WEBER** *Peace and Freedom* - Labor Official/Analyst
- ☐ **JIM WEIR** *Democratic* - Community College Teacher
- ☐ **BRYAN QUINN** *Republican* - Businessman
- ☐ **MICHAEL JACKSON** *Republican* - Satellite Project Manager
- ☐ **ANGELYNE** *Independent* - Entertainer
- ☐ **DOUGLAS ANDERSON** *Republican* - Mortgage Broker
- ☐ **IRIS ADAM** *Natural Law* - Business Analyst
- ☐ **BROOKE ADAMS** *Independent* - Business Executive
- ☐ **ALEX-ST. JAMES** *Republican* - Public Policy Strategist
- ☐ **JIM HOFFMANN** *Republican* - Teacher
- ☐ **KEN HAMIDI** *Libertarian* - State Tax Officer
- ☐ **SARA ANN HANLON** *Independent* - Businesswoman
- ☐ **IVAN A. HALL** *Green* - Custom Denture Manufacturer
- ☐ **JOHN J. "JACK" HICKEY** *Libertarian* - Healthcare District Director
- ☐ **RALPH A. HERNANDEZ** *Democratic* - District Attorney Inspector
- ☐ **C. STEPHEN HENDERSON** *Independent* - Teacher
- ☐ **ARIANNA HUFFINGTON** *Independent* - Author/Columnist/Mother
- ☐ **ART BROWN** *Democratic* - Film Writer/Director
- ☐ **JOEL BRITTON** *Independent* - Retired Meat Packer
- ☐ **AUDIE BOCK** *Democratic* - Educator/Small Businesswoman
- ☐ **VIK S. BAJWA** *Democratic* - Businessman/Father/Entrepreneur
- ☐ **BADI BADIOZAMANI** *Independent* - Entrepreneur/Author/Executive
- ☐ **VIP BHOLA** *Republican* - Attorney/Businessowner
- ☐ **JOHN W. BEARD** *Republican* - Businessman
- ☐ **ED BEYER** *Republican* - Chief Operations Officer
- ☐ **JOHN CHRISTOPHER BURTON** *Independent* - Civil Rights Lawyer
- ☐ **CRUZ M. BUSTAMANTE** *Democratic* - Lieutenant Governor
- ☐ **CHERYL BLY-CHESTER** *Republican* - Businesswoman/Environmental Engineer
- ☐ Write-In

*"Sample ballot for CA recall" by Government of California, Public Domain. Click to enlarge.*

Of the ballot of 100 candidates, one name stood out: actor Arnold Schwarzenegger. In a very crowded race, Shwaeznegger's name recognition propelled him to victory as the new Governor of California with 48% of the votes.

## What do you think?

Recall elections can be used to remove someone from office – even if they have just been elected! Do you think that's a good thing?

## Further Reading & Resources

If you'd like to learn more about this topic, check out the following articles:

- Read about Electoral Reform from Fair Vote Canada
- Learn more about the Electoral College in Attenuated Democracy.

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter,

- Electoral systems are sets of rules that determine how votes are translated into seats; they vary by district structure, ballot design, vote-counting methods, and winning thresholds, influencing both election outcomes and democratic representation.
- Majoritarian systems, such as plurality (First Past the Post) or majority-based methods, aim for clear winners. They can result in candidates winning without a majority of votes and often lead to majority governments with two dominant parties.
- Plurality systems like Canada's SMP are simple and fast but often unrepresentative, as winners can be elected with less than half of the vote. Variants include runoff elections and ranked-choice voting to ensure majority support.
- Proportional representation (PR) systems allocate seats based on the proportion of votes each party receives, using party lists in multimember districts. PR aims to better reflect voter preferences, but often results in coalition governments.
- Closed and open list PR systems differ in voter influence: closed lists are set by parties, while open lists let voters rank candidates. PR systems may impose minimum thresholds to limit fragmentation by small parties.
- Comparing systems, PR encourages more representative results and multiple parties, but may create unstable coalitions and delay vote counts. Plurality systems are faster and simpler but risk misrepresenting the popular will.
- Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) systems, like those in New Zealand and Germany, combine local representation with proportional outcomes, allowing voters to cast two votes—one for a candidate, one for a party.
- Other election types include referendums for public decision-making and recall elections to remove officials mid-term. The U.S. Electoral College is a unique indirect system that can lead to outcomes where the popular vote winner loses.

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OpenAI. (2025, May 30th). ChatGPT. [Large language model]. https://www.chatgpt.com Prompt: Summarize the passage into 8 key points with no additional bullets. *Edited & Reviewed by author.*

## Key Terms

- **Alternate vote (AV) system** is when voters are asked to rank their choices.
- **Coalition government** – requires the parties to work together and form a partnership.
- **Direct democracy** – is a form of government in which citizens have the direct power to make decisions on laws and policies, rather than electing representatives to make those decisions on their behalf. This is often done through tools like referendums, initiatives, and citizen assemblies.
- **Electoral College** – when each state has a given number of electoral votes to allocate, and on election day, the voters in each state decide which candidate should get their votes.
- **Electoral reform –** when a country wants to change some aspect of its electoral system.
- **Electoral system** – A set of rules and methods used to determine how votes are cast, counted, and translated into seats in a legislature or who wins an election.
- **Majoritarian** – A type of electoral system where the candidate or party that receives the majority of votes (more than half or the most votes, depending on the rule) wins. It emphasizes clear winners and stable governments.
- **Majority Government** – where one party controls a majority of seats.
- **Mixed Member Proportional (MMP)** system combines elements of FPTP and plurality systems. With a mixed system, voters cast two votes, one for a local representative (typically in a single-member district) and a second vote for a political party.
- **Party lists** are a type of electoral system in which political parties present a list of candidates to voters
- **Plurality** – A decision rule where the candidate with the most votes wins, regardless of whether they have a majority. Also known as "First Past the Post" (FPTP).
- **Popular Vote** – winning the total number of votes.
- **Proportional** – Refers to an electoral system in which seats in a legislature are allocated in proportion to the number of votes each party receives. It aims to reflect voter preferences more accurately.
- **Referendum** – A direct vote by the electorate on a specific proposal, law, or constitutional amendment. The result may be binding or advisory.
- **Recall** – A process that allows voters to remove an elected official from office before the end of their term, usually through a petition and a special election.
- **Single-member majority system (SMM)** to win an election, a candidate must achieve a majority of support in the district instead of simply getting the most votes (O'Neal, 1993).
- **Threshold** – The minimum level of support (usually a percentage of votes) that a party or candidate must receive to gain representation or proceed to the next stage in an election.
- **Two-round system** uses two separate elections to determine a winner in each district.

# PART 2: THE ELECTION PROCESS

Elections don’t start and stop on election day. There are countless tasks involved in preparing for an election and ensuring its seamless execution.

# CHAPTER 5: ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

## Chapter Outline




*Photo by Phil Hearing, Unsplash License.*

# 5.0 Introduction

In March 2025, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney was ready to convene a new Parliament. However, instead of opening a session, Parliament was dissolved and a writ of election was issued. While the election call was not a complete surprise, it was unannounced. From that moment, thousands of moving parts were set in motion: voter lists needed to be verified, candidate nominations needed to be certified, and 200,000 election workers needed to be hired – all within a five week time frame! This monumental and often invisible work of **election administration** is vital for ensuring elections can happen.

## Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Recall the administrative functions that must be completed by election officials
- Describe the different organizations of Electoral Management Bodies (EMB)
- Compare how election administration might differ across electoral systems

## Things we need to know

In this chapter, you can expect to encounter the following terms/concepts.

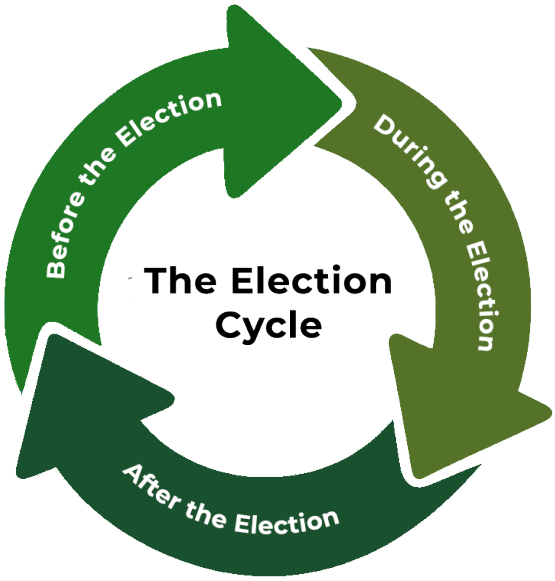
- Electoral Management Body
- Poll Worker
- Scrutineer
- Voter Purges

# 5.1 Managing Elections

Elections don't just happen. They require laws, regulations, resources, and people. In this section, we will examine the different functions that are required to make elections happen. In broad terms, we first want to differentiate between governance – the laws that govern elections, and administration – running the election (James, 2020). Our focus in this section is the administration of elections, typically called **election management**.

## Electoral Management Bodies

The laws governing an election are passed by a legislature, but the implementation of the laws is carried out by an administrative entity called an **Electoral Management Body** (EMB). While the specific role and functions of EMBs will vary, most are responsible for several core functions before, during, and after elections.




*The Election Cycle by Matt Farrell, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

Activity Description
Before the Election
Pre-Election Functions:

- Updating voter rolls
- Hiring **poll workers**
- Planning and securing voting locations
- Voter outreach and education

During the Election
Election Period Functions

- Registering parties, candidates, and new voters

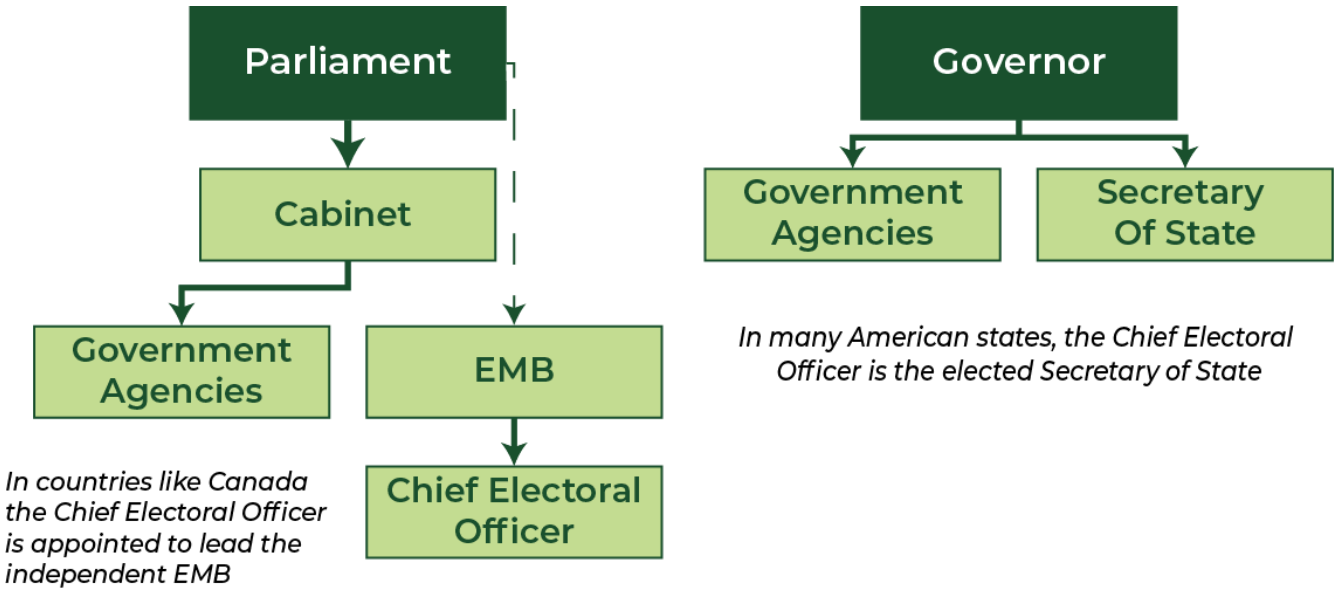
- Voter outreach and education
- Media communication
- **Campaign finance** oversight functions
- Preparing ballots
- Voting day!
- Counting votes
- Tabulating results

After the Election
Post-Election Functions:

- Auditing and verifying totals
- Recounts and dispute resolution
- Reporting and validation of official results

## Organizational Structure

There are different configurations of EMBs, including those run by government offices and those that operate independently. Countries like Canada and Australia have **independent electoral agencies** that report to parliament, but they manage their own budget and otherwise operate independently of the executive branch (Catt et al., 2014). The EMB will be ultimately accountable to Parliament, Cabinet, or a legislative committee, but they are insulated from political interference (Thomas & Gibson, 2015). By contrast, elections in the United States are run by government officials at the State or local level. At the State level, the Secretary of State is the official in charge of elections. There are also election officials at the county level, such as clerks, who are responsible for conducting elections. In many cases, these positions are subject to an openly partisan selection process (Ferrer & Geyn, 2024).




*"Organizational Structure of Independent EMB vs. Governmental EMB" by Koen Liddiard, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

Image Description
A diagram compares the structure of election oversight in Canada and the United States.

Left side (Canada):

- The top box labelled “Parliament” leads to “Cabinet.”
- “Cabinet” connects to both “Government Agencies” and “EMB” (Electoral Management Body).
- “EMB” then connects to “Chief Electoral Officer.”
- A caption below states: “In countries like Canada, the Chief Electoral Officer is appointed to lead the independent EMB.”

Right side (United States):

- The top box labelled “Governor” connects to both “Government Agencies” and “Secretary of State.”
- A caption beneath reads: “In many American states, the Chief Electoral Officer is the elected Secretary of State.”

## Layers of Responsibility

Unitary states often have one centralized agency that oversees elections, referendums, and initiatives in the country. Conversely, some federal states have a more decentralized system with lower levels of government responsible for elections within their provincial, territorial, and local jurisdictions (Catt et al., 2014).

## Management Functions

Managing an election involves several overlapping and connected functions that happen before, during, and after an election (Catt et al., 2014). Next, we will examine some of the important pre-election tasks and responsibilities.

# 5.2 Preparing for an Election

Elections have been described as “the most complex logistical event to be organised during peacetime” (James, 2020). They involve a mass mobilization of people and resources, usually within a tight timeframe. In Canada, a typical election requires the recruitment of 230,000 election workers for over 15,000 polling locations (Thomas & Gibson, 2015). Staffing the election team is an important first step.

## Hiring Election Workers

While some EMB maintain a permanent staff, the bulk of the labour force is temporary. In New Zealand, for example, their national elections office is staffed by approximately 30 people on a permanent basis, but that number will grow to 20,000 **poll workers** who will be deployed on election day (Thomas & Gibson, 2015). Similarly, some American states might employ a handful of permanent election officials, but on election day, over 700,000 poll workers will be spread around the country (Leppert, 2024), most of whom will be older and poorly trained workers (Pastor, n.d.).

## Election Jobs

Election workers can be grouped according to several functions:

### *Election Officials*

The roles, often permanent, might be responsible for procurement, ongoing maintenance of voter rolls, and the hiring and training of new election workers (Leppert, 2024).

### *Poll Workers*

The most numerous type of election staff is the poll worker. These will be short-term, temporary roles, and they are the public-facing staff at the polling station. They carry out:

- Greeting people and wayfinding
- Identify verification
- Checking in voters and distributing ballots
- Providing assistance to voters who need it. Additionally, poll workers might include returning officers who supervise the inventory of materials, counting of votes, and reporting of vote totals (Elections Canada, n.d.-b)

### *Poll Watchers*

Election observers, sometimes called **poll watchers** or scrutineers, are not employees of the electoral management bodies (Leppert, 2024). Typically, poll watchers will be volunteers representing a political party. They will observe the vote-counting process and advocate for their party to ensure all legal votes are counted.

## How much does it pay?

How well does election work pay? It depends. In Canada, most election workers will make $20 per hour (Elections Canada, n.d.-b). In some American states, most election roles pay minimum wage, while some states like Delaware pay $300 for the day (Leppert, 2024).

### Retention Challenges

It's getting harder to find people willing to work in elections. In the United States, many state and local elections offices are having trouble retaining workers from one election to the next. One report found the turnover rate among election officials had increased steadily since the 2000 election. (Ferrer et al., 2024). This may not be surprising. Election work has become more dangerous, with election workers being subject to threats and harassment (Gordon-Rogers, 2024)

## Compiling Voter Lists

Once the team is in place, election workers can begin validating the list of eligible voters called the **voter roll**. Some countries, such as Canada, Australia, and Germany, use systems of **automatic voter registration** in which eligible voters are identified and added to the list by election authorities, whereas in many American states, the burden of registration falls to the individual (Sellers, 2024). In the United States, there are partisan battles over voting registration, with some states making the process easier and others adopting more burdensome registration practices (The Economist, 2025).

## Maintaining Accurate Lists

Accurate voter lists are essential to ensure that voters only cast one vote during an election. Maintaining an accurate voter roll can be challenging, especially in large electorates such as India, with approximately 800 million voters. The task is made even more difficult by India's lack of universal identification, which, critics contend, leads to an inaccurate list (Thomas & Gibson, 2015). To improve accuracy, some American states use regular **voter purges** to remove inactive voters from their lists. These can be prone to error (Levine, 2023) and are sometimes used to intentionally disenfranchise voters (Waldman, 2024).

## Who is ERIC?

In 2021, the **Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC)** was formed to help American States keep their voter lists updated. It is a voluntary consortium of election administrators from several states. The ERIC systems can identify voters who have moved, voters who appear on two voters lists, and voters who have deceased (ERIC, n.d.). After identifying these entries, the election administrators can remove any voter registrations that are incorrect. Despite the initiative's success, some states have withdrawn from the intuitive over partisan attacks and misinformation campaigns (Fifield, 2023).

# 5.3 During the Election Campaign

Once an election period begins, election officials must run the election according to relevant election laws. For Australia's Electoral Management Body, the mission is simple: "deliver the franchise" (Australian Election Commission, n.d). That mission involves several core functions: **voter roll** management, election management, education, and communication (Thomas & Gibson, 2015). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the Electoral Commission works to "promote public confidence in the democratic process and ensure its integrity" (Electoral Commission, 2025). While the specific mechanics will vary, the execution of an election will involve several steps. The relevant election authorities must start planning their schedule, solidifying the list of candidates and voters, and communicating the necessary information to voters.

## Establish the Electoral Calendar

Elections in the United States follow predictable timetables. The system of fixed election dates prescribes set dates for primary elections and general elections months and even years in advance (Ballotpedia, 2025b). Many countries, however, don't have that luxury. Elections can be triggered by resignations of governments or the dissolution of parliament. These can be unexpected. For example, election calls in New Zealand trigger a seven to eight-week election period, which is a tight timeframe for hiring staff and securing voting locations (Thomas & Gibson, 2015). Most **electoral calendars** identify milestones and deadlines for candidate recruitment, voter registration, and ballot printing (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-d). The graphic below provides an example of an election timeline in a Parliamentary system.

## 2024 UK General Election Timeline

Text Description
**May 30 – Dissolution of Parliament**

- Parliament dissolves & writ of election issued.

35 days until election day

**June 7 – Filing Deadline**

- Last day for candidates to submit nominating papers
- Also last day for candidates to withdraw their nominations

27 days until election day

**June 18 – Registration Deadline**

- Final day for voters to register

16 days until election day

**June 19th – Proxy Application Deadline**

- Final day for application from voters who want to vote by mail, known as absent voting in the UK..

15 days until election day

**July 4 – Election Day**

- Polling locations open from 7:00am and 10:00pm
- Votes are counted after polls close
- Parliament resumes on July 9

"General Election 2024 Timetable" by UK Parliament, used under Open Parliament License. Modifications: abridged & summarized.

## Register Parties and Candidates

During the election campaign, EMBs will also establish a process and deadlines for individuals who wish to register as candidates. Candidates in **plurality systems** are often nominated individually through a nomination meeting in the electoral district. By contrast, parties in proportional systems might have more centralized control over the placement of candidates on party lists (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-b).

## Candidate Criteria

Most systems require candidates to meet minimum requirements, such as proving geographic residency,

paying of fees or deposits, or obtaining signatures (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-b). In Canada, for example, candidates may stand for election after completing nomination paperwork and presenting a list of signatures from eligible electors (Elections Canada, 2024). Political parties will also have minimum requirements to meet.

### How to Start a Political Party in Canada

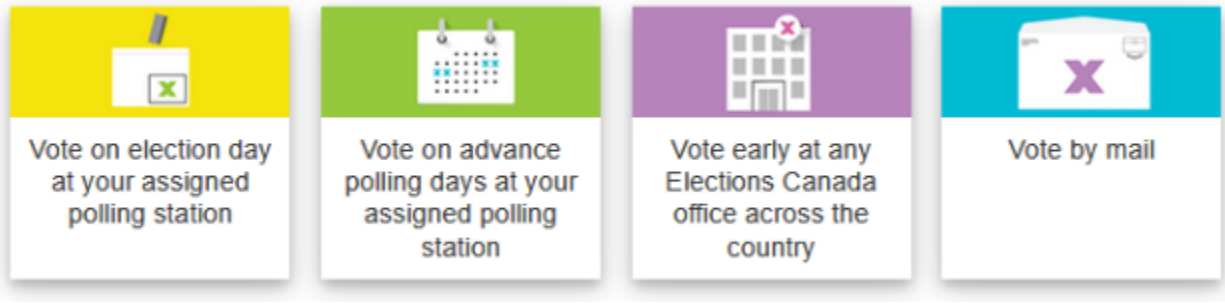
In Canada, political parties can register by completing a form and meeting some minimum organizational requirements.

1. Choose a party name
2. Identify a party leader, three party officers, and financial officials
3. Provide Information from a minimum of 250 party supporters
4. Complete a form: Application to Register a Political Party (EC 20400)[PDF]

## Voter outreach and education

EMB's are responsible for communicating information to voters about upcoming elections. These education and outreach initiatives are often targeted at low-propensity voters or voters who might otherwise face barriers to voting (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-j)

Elections Canada maintains an online Voter Information Service that houses a collection of resources that includes guides, infographics, frequently asked questions, and a tool to help voters look up their voting location (Elections Canada, 2025 March)




*"Ways to Vote" by Elections Canada, Non-commercial Reproduction.*

Image Description
Ways to Vote

- Vote on election day at your assigned polling station
- Vote on advance polling days at your assigned polling station
- Vote early at any Elections Canada office across the country
- Vote by mail

After establishing the candidates and connecting with voters, EMBs must turn their attention to enforcing election laws.

# 5.4 Investigation and Enforcement

During an election campaign, there must be some mechanism for ensuring parties and candidates remain compliant with election laws and regulations. These functions are vital for maintaining public trust in elections. In most countries, an EMB is responsible for monitoring and enforcement of election laws (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-d). By contrast, some EMBs, such as New Zealand's electoral commission, do not have the power to investigate election-related offences (Thomas & Gibson, 2015 ).

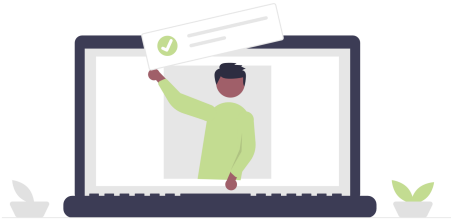
## Campaign Finance

Tracking financial expenditures from candidates and campaigns is an important part of election oversight. Elections Canada, for example, combines spending limits, financial disclosure, and transparency requirements to manage the influence of money in election campaigns (Elections Canada, 2024 September). In America, the Federal Election Commission (FEC) handles campaign finance oversight, and it is composed of three democratic and three republican appointees. The FEC's bipartisan structure often results in deadlocks that block enforcement action, and the body itself may lack a quorum if a president fails to appoint commissioners (Weiner, 2025).

### Canada's Robocall Scandal

In the 2011 Canadian Federal Election, some voters in a Guelph area electoral district reported receiving an automated voice message, called a **robocall**. The recorded message left instructions for voters to vote at an incorrect polling location. An investigation was conducted by Canada's election commissioner (See Summary Investigation Report on Robocalls [PDF]). Eventually, one campaign worker was found guilty of preventing an elector from voting (The Canadian Press, 2014)

## Campaigns in the Digital Age



Most election laws are country-specific and tied to geographic regions, yet digital communications technologies don't adhere to terrestrial boundaries. Canada has grappled with the implications of **foreign interference** in domestic elections (Hogue, 2025). Elsewhere, digital advertising has proven challenging for election authorities in Europe, who have struggled to regulate online advertising (Wolfs, 2024). The spread of AI and other communications technologies will no doubt complicate election oversight.

# 5.5 Chapter Summary

## Real Life Example: Voter Education for a First Election

In 2006, the King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, abdicated the throne and decided to hold elections for the first time in the Kingdom's history. One small problem: the citizens didn't know how to vote. After living in a hereditary monarchy, many citizens were unfamiliar with the process of a democratic election. As a form of voter outreach and education, a mock election was held so voters could learn about the process (Sengupta, 2007).


*"ECB Logo" by the Election Commission of Bhutan, FDEd (CAN).*

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter,

- Election administration is a complex, time-sensitive process involving voter list verification, candidate certification, and the hiring of thousands of workers, all coordinated by Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs), which differ by country in structure and independence.
- EMBs can be independent (like in Canada and Australia) or government-run (as in many parts of the U.S.), with varying degrees of insulation from political influence, and can operate centrally or through decentralized provincial or local offices depending on the country's structure.
- Hiring and staffing elections require a massive temporary workforce, especially poll workers and officials, who perform tasks like voter check-in, ballot distribution, and vote counting; however, there are growing issues with recruitment and retention due to low pay and safety concerns.
- Compiling and maintaining voter lists is crucial to election integrity; countries with automatic registration (e.g., Canada and Germany) differ significantly from the U.S., where registration is more fragmented and often politically contested, and where voter purges have led to errors and disenfranchisement.
- Establishing election timelines is a key part of EMB duties, with some countries operating under fixed election calendars (e.g., the U.S.) and others needing to respond quickly to unexpected elections (e.g., New Zealand), all while managing deadlines for registration, nominations, and voting logistics.
- Candidate and party registration vary by electoral system, with plurality systems relying on district-level nominations and proportional systems on party lists, all requiring candidates to meet specific legal criteria; political parties must also follow registration rules to be recognized officially.
- Voter education and outreach are essential EMB responsibilities, particularly for underrepresented groups; tools like Canada's online voter information portal are examples of resources to support public engagement and access to the democratic process.
- Monitoring and enforcement of election laws, including campaign finance, is necessary to uphold election fairness; however, enforcement powers and effectiveness vary. Canada has mechanisms for investigating misconduct, while the U.S. Federal Election Commission often struggles with partisanship and deadlock.

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OpenAI. (2025, June 5th). ChatGPT. [Large language model]. https://www.chatgpt.com Prompt: Can you please summarize the passage into 8 key points with no additional bullets? *Edited & Reviewed by author.*

## Key Terms

- **Automatic Voter Registration** – A system in which eligible individuals are automatically registered to vote through interactions with government agencies, reducing the burden on individuals to register themselves.
- **Campaign Finance** – The regulation and tracking of money spent by candidates, political parties, and other groups during election campaigns to ensure transparency and fairness.
- **Electoral Calendar** – A timeline of events and deadlines leading up to and including election day, such as registration deadlines, candidate nominations, and ballot printing.
- **Electoral Management Body (EMB)** – An organization responsible for administering elections, which includes planning, staffing, maintaining voter rolls, and ensuring election laws are followed. EMBs may be independent or part of a government.
- **ERIC (Electronic Registration Information Center)** – A voluntary collaboration among U.S. states to improve the accuracy of voter rolls by identifying duplicate, outdated, or invalid registrations.
- **Foreign Interference** – Efforts by foreign governments or actors to influence or disrupt a country's election process, often through digital or covert means.
- **Independent Electoral Agencies** – Report to parliament, but manage their own budget and otherwise operate independently of the executive branch.
- **Nomination Paperwork** – Forms and documentation required for a person to be officially recognized as a candidate in an election, often including signatures from eligible voters and other legal qualifications.
- **Plurality System** – An electoral system in which the candidate with the most votes in a district wins, even if they do not receive more than half of the votes (also called "first-past-the-post").
- **Poll Watchers** – Volunteers, often affiliated with political parties, who observe the voting and counting process to ensure fairness and transparency. They are not official election staff.
- **Poll Workers** – Temporary election staff who work at polling stations and handle duties such as checking in voters, verifying identity, distributing ballots, and assisting with voting.
- **Proportional System** – An electoral system where parties receive seats in proportion to the number of votes they receive, typically using party lists rather than individual candidates per district.
- **Robocall** – An automated phone call that delivers a recorded message. In elections, robocalls can be used for voter outreach—or, controversially, for misleading voters.
- **Voter Purges** – The practice of removing names from the voter roll, typically to eliminate duplicate, deceased, or inactive voter registrations. While intended for accuracy, they can sometimes lead to errors or disenfranchisement.
- **Voter Roll** – An official list of individuals eligible to vote in an election. Also referred to as the voter list or voter registration list.

# CHAPTER 6: CASTING VOTES

## Chapter Outline



*Photo by Faruk Tokuoğlu, Pexels License.*

# 6.0 Introduction

Long lines of voters are a common sight in American elections. In one election, voters in Florida waited, on average, almost 40 minutes to cast votes, while voters in Vermont waited less than two minutes (Ansolabehere & Shaw, 2016). Why the difference? The time it takes to vote is a function of several factors, including the number of voting locations and the complexity of the ballot. In this section, we will examine the process of casting votes and the different procedures and technologies that are used in the process.

## Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Describe the process of casting a vote
- Consider the strengths and weaknesses of different voting technologies
- Explain how voter turnout might be increased by making voting more convenient

## Things we need to know

In this chapter, you can expect to encounter the following terms/concepts.

- Ballot Marking Device (BMD)
- Direct Recording Electronic (DRE) systems
- Convenience voting
- Provisional ballots

# 6.1 Voting Procedures

The action of casting a vote might seem rather ordinary, but there are important mechanical and logistical aspects of voting that help elections run smoothly.

## The Voting Location

The starting point of casting a ballot is determining where to vote. Election laws will specify the minimum requirements for a *voting location* (sometimes called a *voting station, polling place, or precinct*). These factors might include geographic proximity to voters, adequate size to accommodate voters, **accessibility** features, and basic amenities such as electricity, furniture, and restrooms. According to the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network (n.d.-g), the layout of a voting location must balance several features:

**Efficiency**

The polling site must facilitate the flow of voters in and out of the facility.

**Secrecy**

Voting compartments, such as privacy screens or voting booths, must be present to ensure the secrecy of voting.

**Transparency**

A voting process in which voters can see their ballot being inserted into a ballot box or a counting machine.

**Accessibility**

An ideal voting place is barrier-free and accessible for people with mobility issues.

**Security**

Physical security of the ballots should be maintained.

There will also be provisions for a minimum number of voting locations to ensure that distance is not an obstacle to casting a vote. For example, in Canada, the median distance voters typically travel to a polling location is less than one kilometre (Garnett & Grogan, 2021).

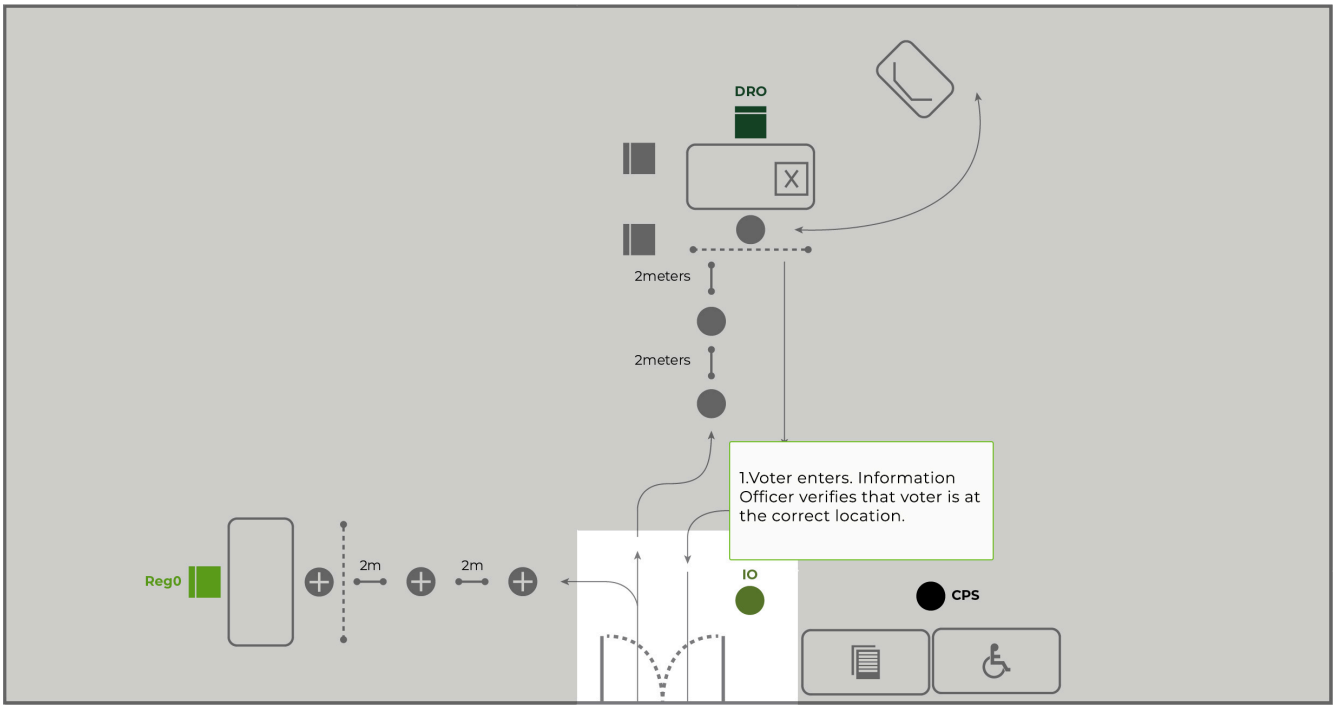
## Casting a Vote

After travelling to a voting location, voters can cast their vote. Casting a ballot involves several discrete steps: authentication, ballot marking, and ballot insertion (Herron & Smith, 2016). The voting location must have sufficient space to accommodate this process. It must also accommodate the voters, election officials, and the

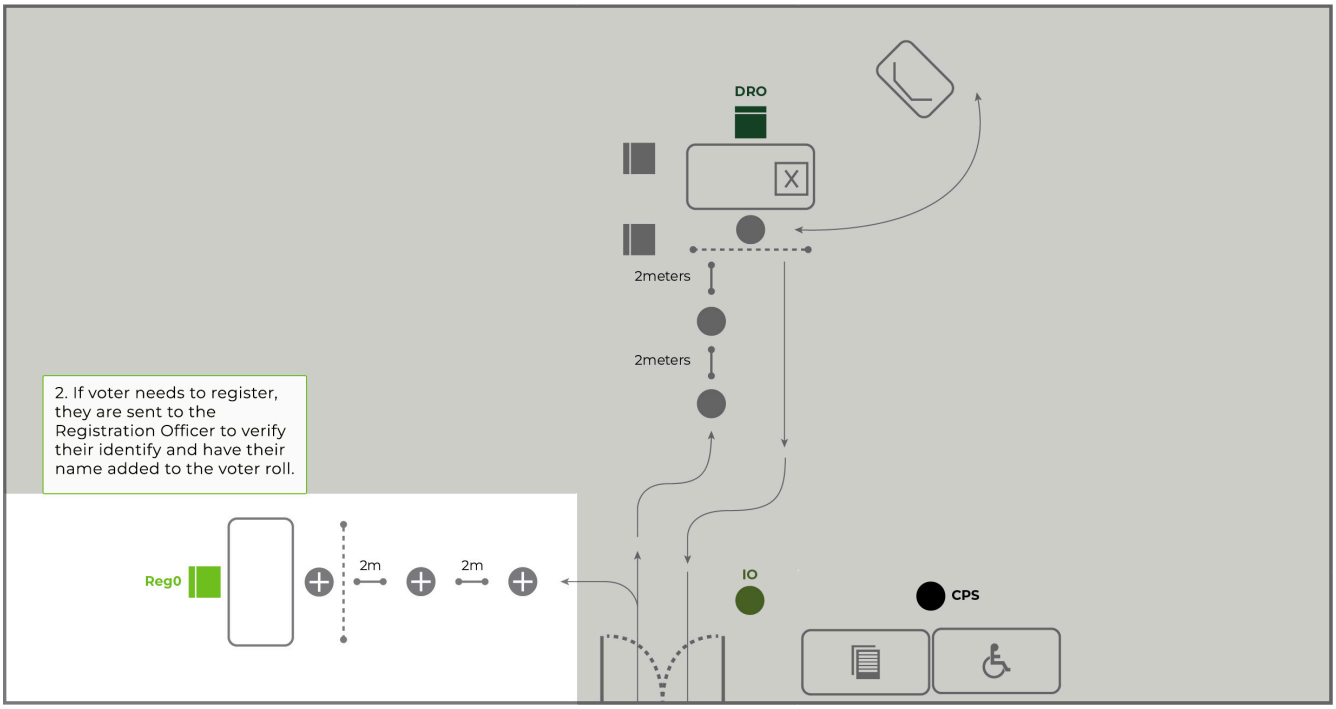
required election materials. Click on the image below for a description of the voting process at a typical voting location in Canada.
Activity Description

1. Voter enters. Information Officer verifies that voter is at the correct location.
2. If voter needs to register, they are sent to the Registration Officer to verify their identity and have their name added to the voter roll.
3. Once authenticated, voter obtains ballot from Poll Clerk.
4. Voter marks their ballot behind a privacy screen.
5. Voter returns folded ballot to Deputy Returning Officer, who inserts completed ballot into ballot box.
6. Candidate and party representatives (called scrutineers or poll watchers) may be present to observe the process.
7. The Central Poll Supervisor handles questions, complaints, and disputes.
8. The full flow of the steps listed above.

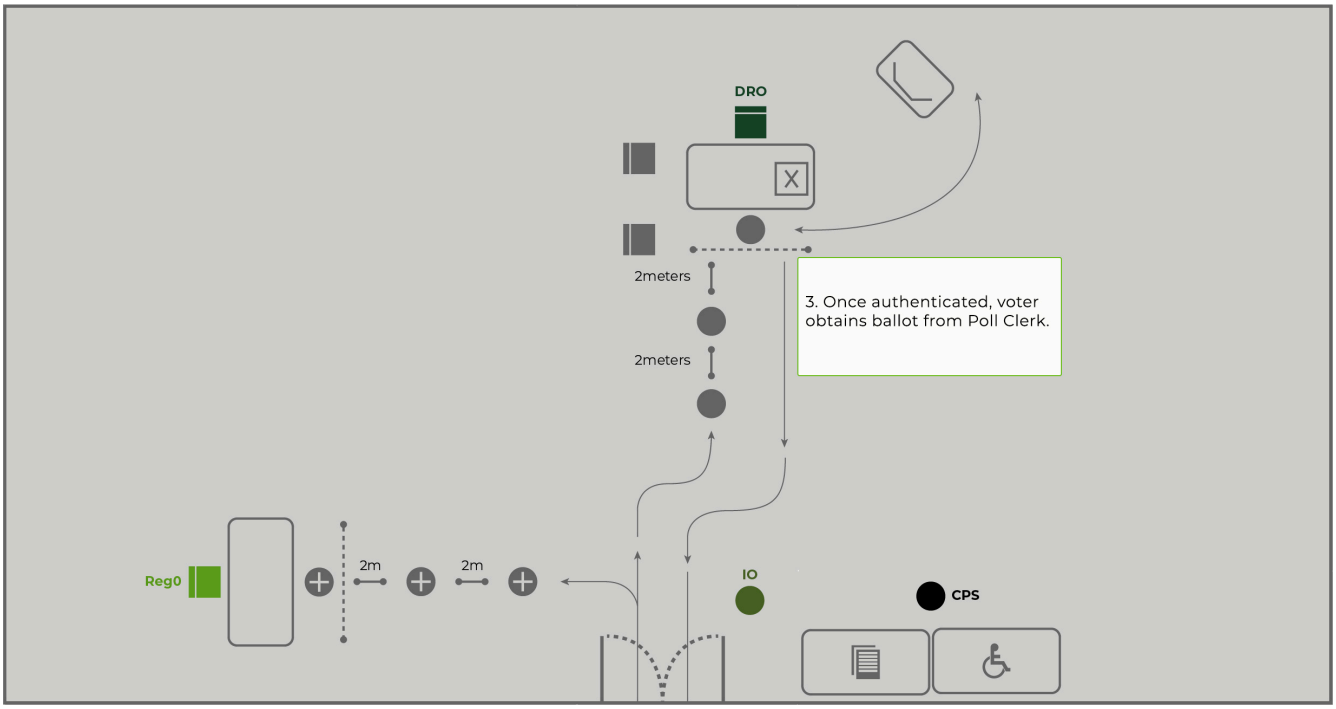
1. Voter enters. Information Officer verifies that voter is at the correct location.



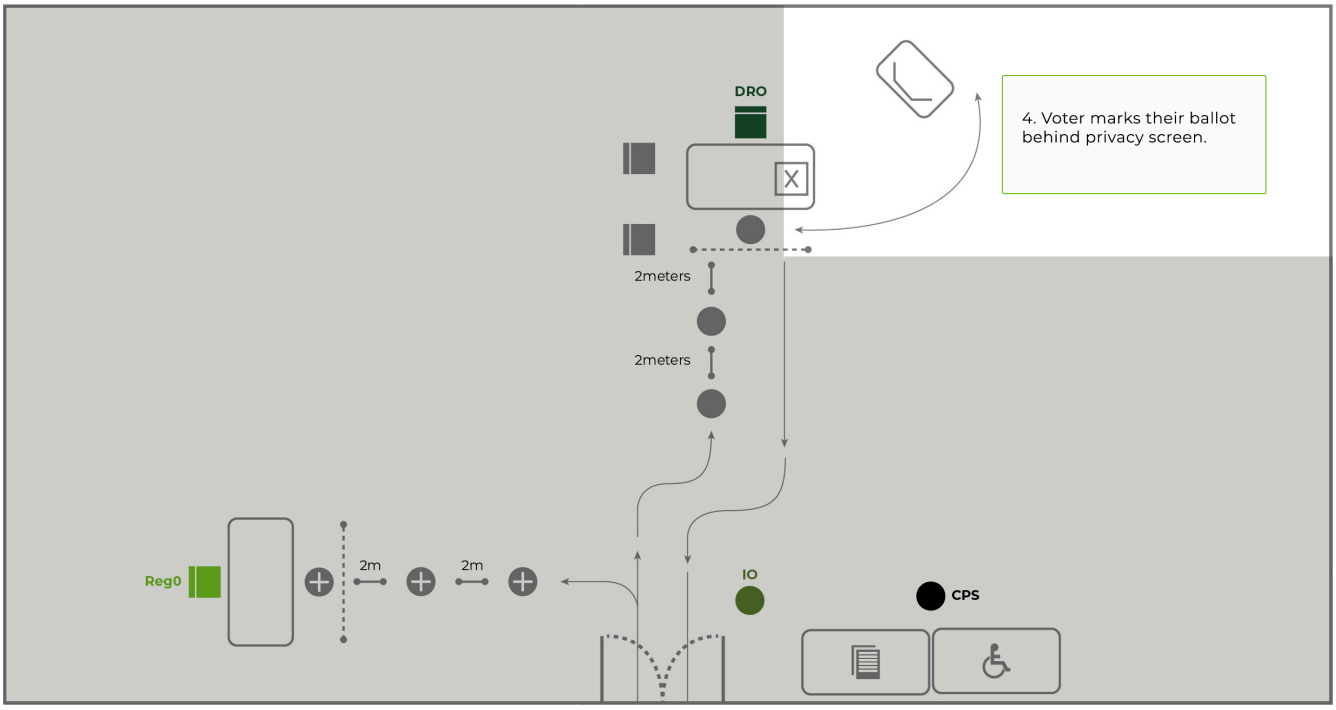

2. If voter needs to register, they are sent to the Registration Officer to verify their identity and have their name added to the voter roll.



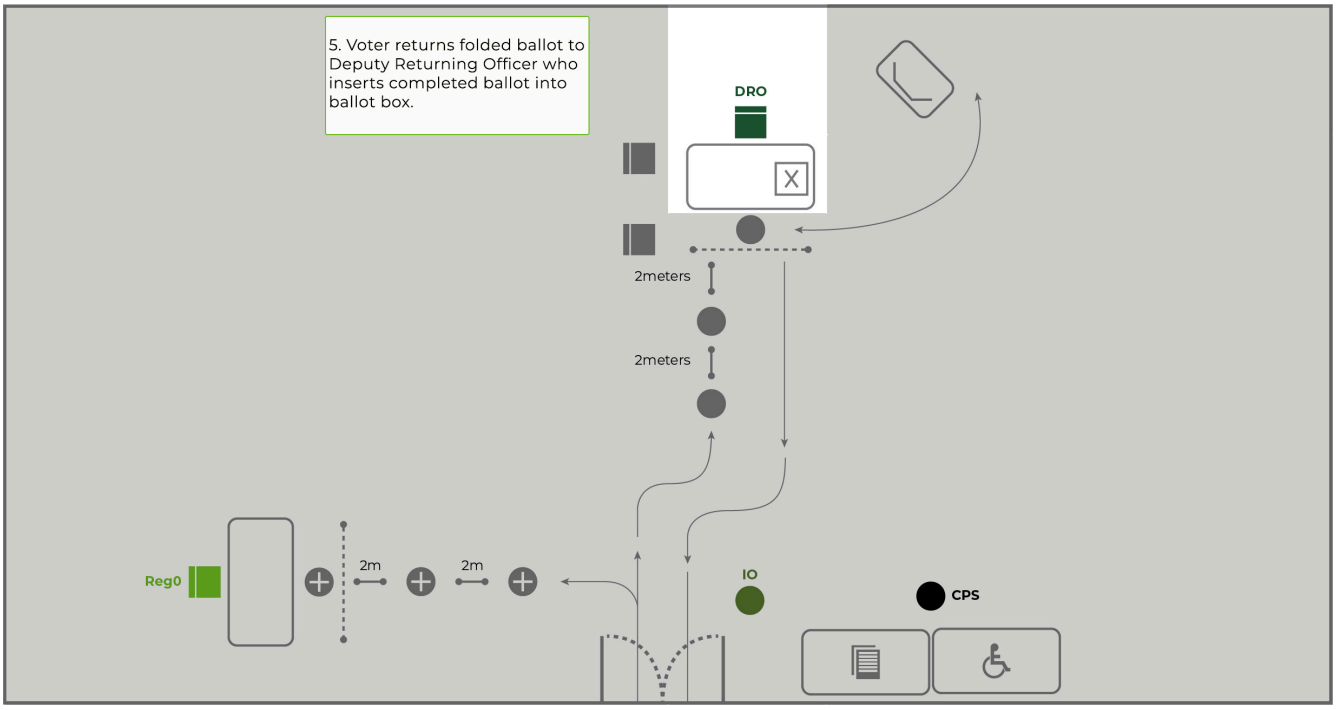

3. Once authenticated, voter obtains ballot from Poll Clerk.



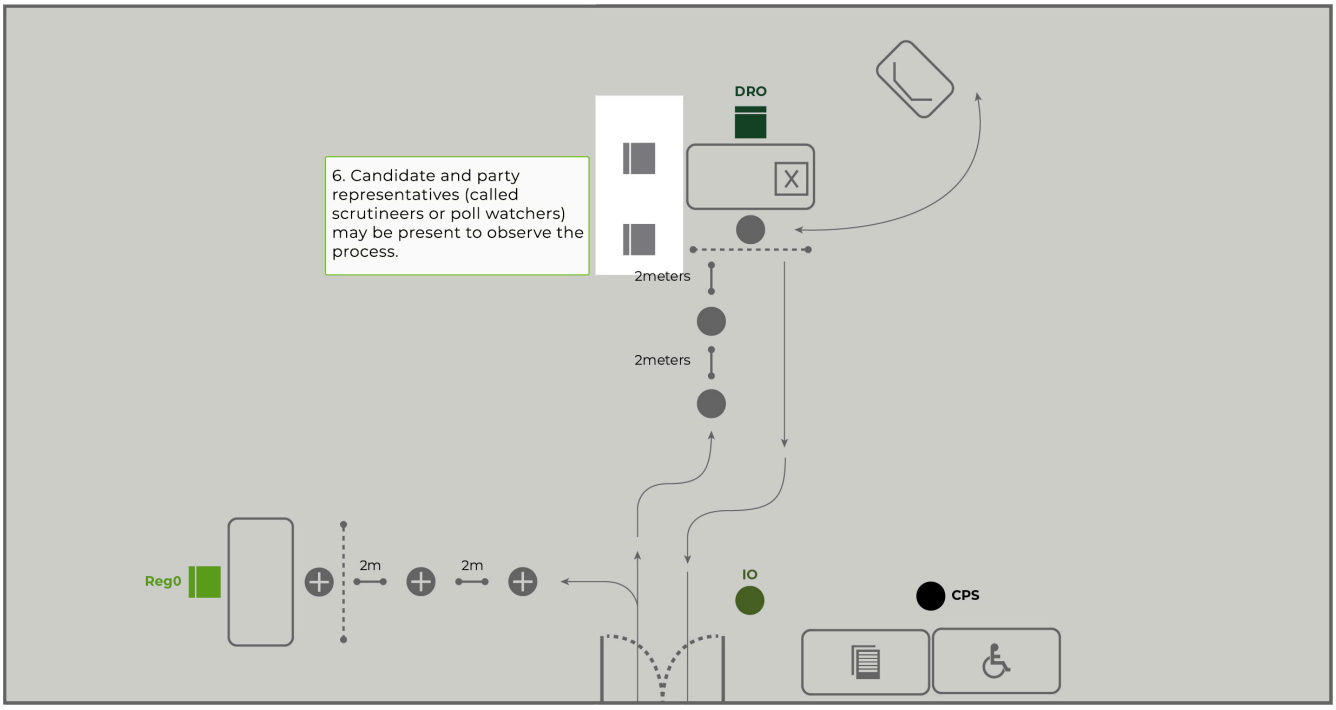

4. Voter marks their ballot behind privacy screen.



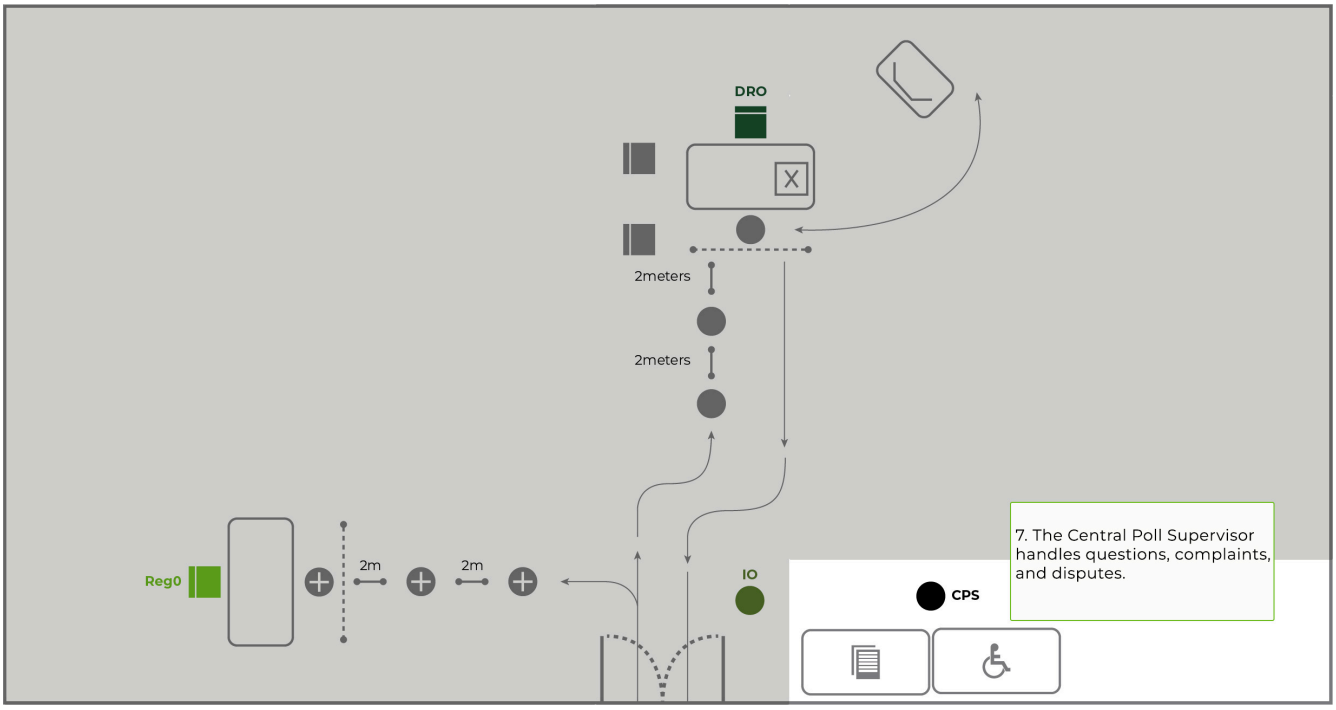

5. Voter returns folded ballot to Deputy Returning Officer, who inserts completed ballot into ballot box.



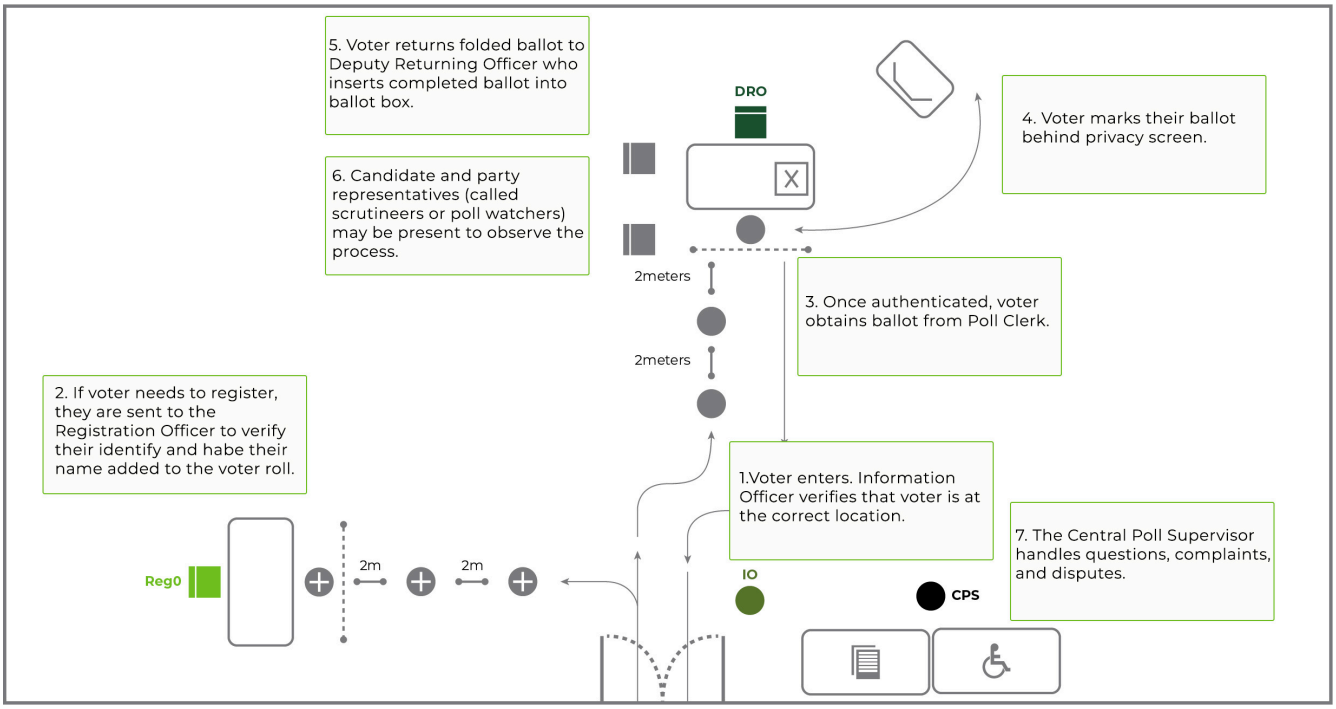

6. Candidate and party representatives (called scrutineers or poll watchers) may be present to observe the process.




7. The Central Poll Supervisor handles questions, complaints, and disputes.




8. The full flow of the steps listed above.




Created by Fanshawe College. Content reference: Central Poll Supervisor Guidebook from Elections Canada. The layout and organization of a polling location will vary, depending on space and resources. For example, using smaller spaces with fewer voting booths can increase wait times and have a negative impact on the overall voting experience (Herron & Smith, 2016). There are also minimum criteria to consider when selecting voting locations. The checklist below provides examples of the factors used in Canada to identify potential polling places.

## How to choose a voting location?

### Public Transit

1. Public transit stop near the polling place? (Yes/No)

### Parking

2. Parking available? (Yes/No)
3. Number of available parking spaces on the property:
4. Parking space(s) for persons with disabilities? (Yes/No)
5. Surface of parking firm and level? (Yes/No)
6. Parking lit? (Yes/No)
7. Pathway from parking lot to the entrance? (Yes/No)

### Building Exterior

8. Sloping sidewalk (curb cut)? (Yes/No)
9. [Mandatory accessibility criterion] Surface of the pathway is firm and obstacle-free? (Yes/No)
10. [Mandatory accessibility criterion] Pathway is at least 920 mm (36") wide? (Yes/No)
    - At the narrowest point the pathway measures (mm):
11. Pathway is free of a long slope? (Yes/No)
12. Pathway is free of a steep incline? (Yes/No)
13. [Mandatory accessibility criterion] Building provides a level access to the entrance? (no steps) (Yes/No)
14. Level access ramp is provided? (Yes/No)
15. If there is a level access ramp, it provides:
    - Handrail? (Yes/No)
    - Non-slip surface? (Yes/No)
    - Clear width of 920 mm (36")? (Yes/No)
    - What is the width of the ramp (mm)?
    - A slope of no more than 4.80°? (Yes/No)
    - Indicate the steepest result: (# of degrees)
16. [Mandatory accessibility criterion] Exterior building lighting? (Yes/No)
17. [Mandatory accessibility criterion] Building exterior is free of any protruding objects? (Yes/No)
18. There is signage to locate the level access entrance? (Yes/No)

### Building Entrance

19. [Mandatory accessibility criterion] Exterior door has a clear opening width of 810 mm (32")? (Yes/No)
    - Opening width of this door measures (mm):
20. Door handles are easy to grip? (Yes/No)
21. [Mandatory accessibility criterion] Door threshold meets maximum standard of 6 mm (1/4")? (Yes/No)
22. An automatic door opening device is provided (Yes/No)
23. [Mandatory accessibility criterion] Weight of the entrance door allows it to be easily opened? (Yes/No)
24. Door gives immediate access to the voting room? (Yes/No)

*Note: If yes, go to question 30.*

## Building Interior

25. [Mandatory accessibility criterion] Interior door(s) has a clear opening width of 810 mm (32")? (Yes/No)
    - Interior door opening width measurements (mm):
26. Door handles are easy to grip? (Yes/No)
27. Automatic door opening devices are provided for interior doors? (Yes/No
28. [Mandatory accessibility criterion] Weight of interior doors allows them to be easily opened? (Yes/No)
29. [Mandatory accessibility criterion] Door threshold meets maximum standard of 6 mm (1/4")? (Yes/No)
30. [Mandatory accessibility criterion] Corridors have a minimum width of 920 mm (36")? (Yes/No)
    - Minimum width of the corridor(s) measures (mm):
31. [Mandatory accessibility criterion] Interior of the building is free of any protruding objects? (Yes/No)
32. [Mandatory accessibility criterion] Voting room is on the same level as the entrance? (Yes/No)
33. If no, can electors access the voting room using an elevator or a level access ramp? (Yes/No)
34. If use of an elevator is required, is a key necessary to operate it? (Yes/No) If yes, who is the contact person for the key?
35. If electors must use a ramp to access the voting room, this ramp provides:
    - Handrail? (Yes/No)
    - Non-slip surface? (Yes/No)
    - Clear width of 920 mm (36")? (Yes/No)
    - What is the width of the ramp (mm):
    - A slope of no more than 4.80°? (Yes/No)
    - Indicate the steepest result: (# of degrees)
36. [Mandatory accessibility criterion] Interior lighting works? (Yes/No)
37. Wheelchair accessible washroom (Yes/No)

- Are there any grab bars? (Yes/No)

### Overall Evaluation

38. Does this site meet all the mandatory accessibility criteria? (Yes/No)
39. If not, is it possible to modify the site so that it will meet all the mandatory criteria? (Yes/No)

Was the evaluation done on-site? (Yes/No)
If yes, when (mm/dd/yy): By whom:

---

Polling Place Suitability Checklist by Elections Canada. Used under Non-commercial Reproduction terms. This is a copy of the version available at: Polling Place Suitability Checklist.

## Does Location Matter?

Ultimately, voting imposes a time cost on voters (Blais et al. 2021), and when that cost increases, voters may be less likely to vote in the future. Some research suggests that waiting an additional hour to vote decreases the probability of future voting by one percentage point (Pettigrew, 2021). However, location is only one factor in creating an efficient voting process. In some places, voting may take longer due to the type of system, complexity of the ballot, or the voting procedures in place. Different voting technologies have the potential to reduce the time required to vote. That's what we will look at next.

# 6.2 Voting Technologies

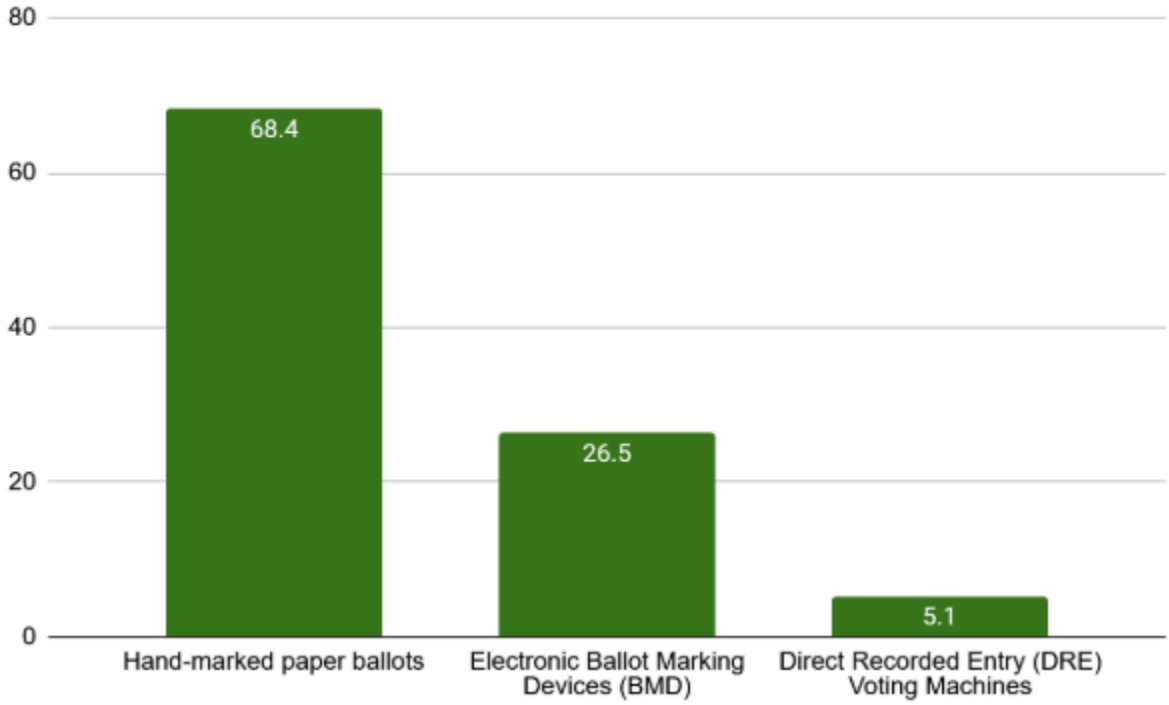
As the Australian ballot began to proliferate in North America, some voters harboured suspicions that election officials could spoil ballots by ripping or damaging them. To safeguard the integrity of the vote, mechanical technologies began to emerge. By the 1890s, some American elections used voting machines with mechanical levers for voters to cast their votes (Mayton and Reno, 2021).

Over time, mechanical voting aids such as punch cards and levers had fallen out of favour. Equipment breakdowns and maintenance costs negated any cost savings, and the potential for corruption remained.


*Example of a Lever Voting Machine. Image by Pauljoffe, CC BY-SA 3.0.*

## Contemporary Voting Practices

Currently, the most common form of voting involves manual ballot marking with a pen, pencil, or marker. Over 200 countries use some form of manual ballot marking (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-a). Alternatively, voters could use a piece of technology, such as a lever, punch card, or electronic **Ballot Marking Device (BMD)**. American elections offer an interesting cross-section of technologies used for casting votes. The decentralized nature of electoral management means that different countries may adopt their own practices and technologies.




*Voting practices in American states: Percentage of Americans in jurisdictions where each technology is used. (Verified Voting, n.d.)*

## Manual Paper Ballots

Almost 70% of American voters live in jurisdictions that use hand-marked paper ballots (Verified Voting, n.d.). Despite the potential time savings associated with voting machines, manual voting remains popular because "paper ballots marked by hand create a tangible, tamper-evident and auditable record of voter selections" (Verified Voting, n.d., para. 1). The counting procedures may vary, with some counting performed manually, and others using optical scan technology, but paper ballots continue to be the most common method for casting votes.

## Electronic Ballot Marking Devices (BMD)

An electronic BMD uses a computer interface to give voters an "electronic presentation of a ballot" (Ballotpedia, 2025b). With a BMD, the vote is only recorded and displayed for the user – it is not stored on the device. The video below was created by election officials in Los Angeles County to introduce voters to their new Ballot Marking Device machines.

This video outlines how to use the new ballot marking device, or Electronic Ballot Marking Devices.

Watch How to vote on the NEW Ballot Marking Device at https://youtu.be/CGLE0fkBc4c?feature=shared

## Direct Recording Electronic (DRE) Systems

After the controversy created by Palm Beach County's butterfly ballot during the 2000 Presidential election, Congress passed the Help America Vote Act, which, among other things, required that states update election technology (EAC, n.d.). Many states chose to purchase **Direct Recording Electronic** (DRE) systems, more commonly known as *voting machines*. DRE machines will typically use a touchscreen to record votes, and the voting record will be stored on the machine's hard drive or data cartridge (Ballotpedia, 2025b).

### *Dominion Voting Settlement*

After the 2020 Presidential election, many Republican voters and candidates alleged that a particular type of voting machine, made by Dominion Voting Systems, had fabricated their results. The Fox Corporation made the accusations a central part of their post-election commentary on Fox News programs and was sued by Dominion for defamation. Eventually, Fox settled the claim and agreed to pay Dominion 787 million dollars (Huseman, 2023).

To ensure the integrity of the voting process, many DRE systems produce a **Voter-Verifiable Paper Audit Trail** (VVPAT), which is similar to a paper receipt (Ballotpedia, 2025). The receipt may not have any meaningful information for voters, but it may have a barcode, QR code, or other identifier that can be used for recounts.

# 6.3 Alternate Voting Arrangements

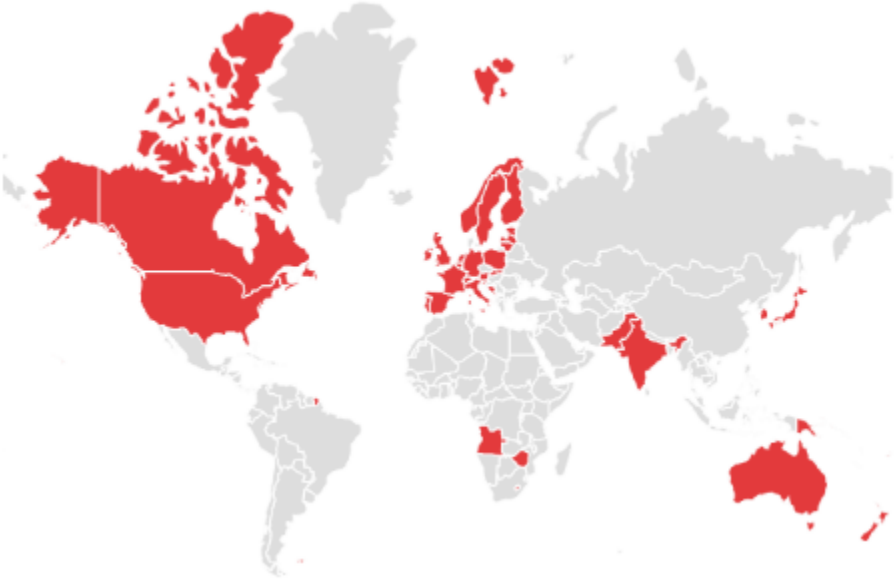
Running an election where millions – sometimes tens of millions of voters – cast votes in a single day is a monumental feat of coordination. At an individual level, some jurisdictions may require voters to travel or take leave from their jobs to cast a vote. To make things easier for voters and election administrators, it might make sense to allow alternative voting arrangements. These measures, called **convenience voting**, might include allowing some voters to cast their ballots before election day or allowing voters to cast their ballot by mail (Gronke et al., 2008).

## Advance Voting

Early voting or **advance voting** allows voters to cast their votes in their electoral district in advance of election day. Early voting locations are typically open later into the evening to accommodate voters who might be unable to vote during conventional business hours (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-h).

## Absent or Absentee Voting

**Absentee voting** allows voters to cast a vote when they will not be able to vote in person at the election location. Voting by mail is the most common method for voting by mail. In some countries, such as Canada, voters must apply for a special ballot by a prescribed deadline. The EMB will then send out the correct ballot, two envelopes (for privacy) and instructions for completion (Elections Canada, 2025 May). Forty-five countries allow some form of voting by mail (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-a)



*Countries Where Voters Can Vote by Mail. "Where can electors vote? By Mail" by ACE Project, FDEd (CAN).*

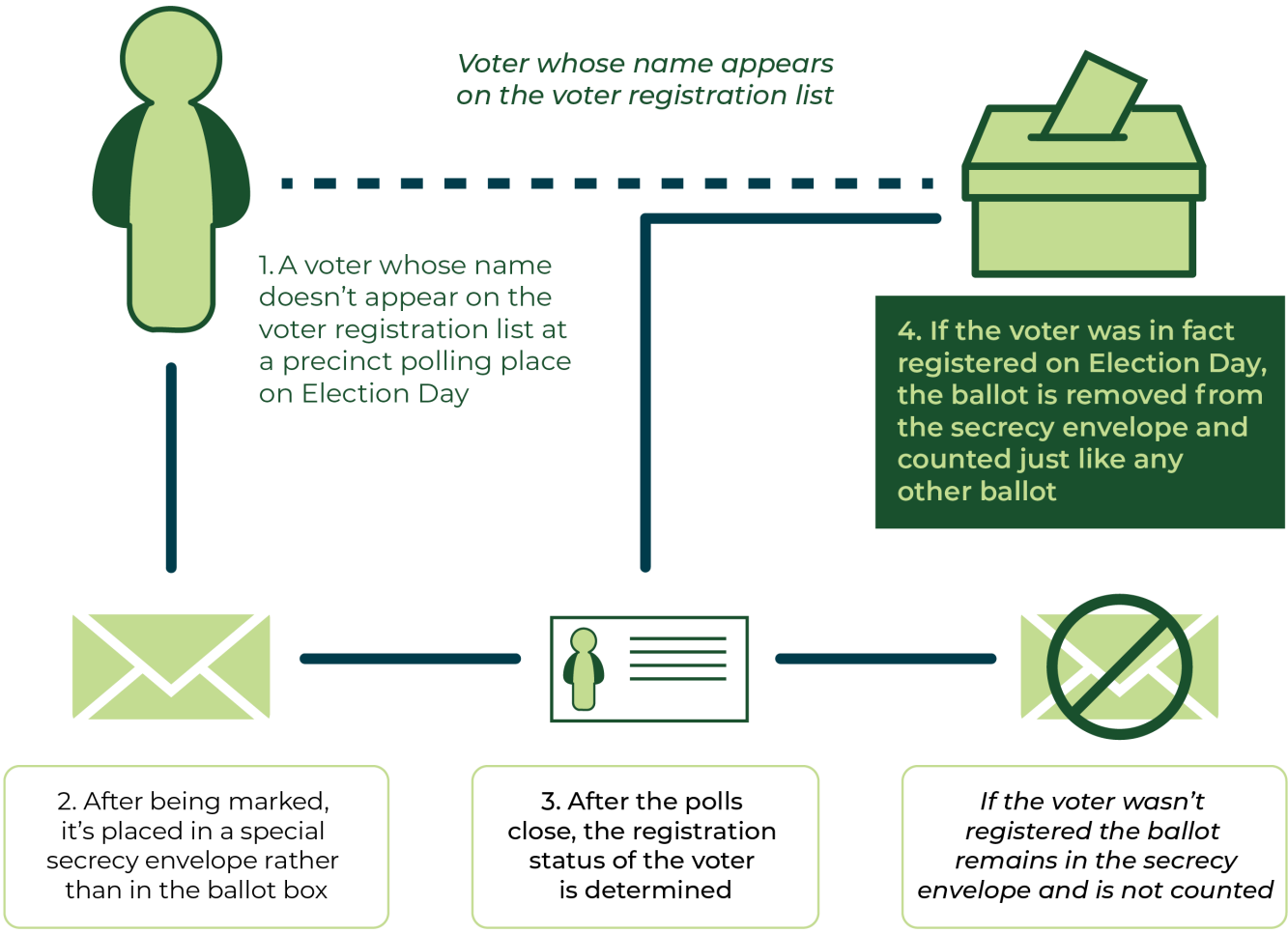
In many American states, voters must request an absentee ballot, and there are a limited number of reasons for granting the request. Some states, such as Florida, offer no-excuse absentee voting, and others, such as Colorado, automatically mail a ballot to all voters (Ballotpedia, 2025b). Depending on the state, absentee ballots can be returned by mail or in person at centralized locations such as a drop box or county election office (Gronke et al., 2008).

### Pandemic Voting

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries adapted by increasing the availability of absentee voting options. In the 2020 American Presidential Election, the rate of mail voting doubled compared to 2016 levels (Stewart, 2020).

## Provisional Ballots

Sometimes a vote may be accepted tentatively, but its counting will be contingent on verification. These **provisional ballots** are typically cast by voters who are eligible but are not on the voters list (Ballotpedia, 2025b). The ballot is marked and set aside until the voter's identity and registration can be authenticated. Once verified, the vote is counted. The graphic below illustrates a typical process for a provisional ballot in America.




*"Provisional Ballot Process" by Koen Liddiard, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. (MIT Election Lab, 2024)*

Image Description

A flowchart explains what happens when a voter's name does not appear on the voter registration list at a polling place on Election Day.

The process begins with a figure representing a voter whose name doesn't appear on the registration list.

The voter is allowed to cast a ballot, which is placed in a special secrecy envelope instead of the ballot box.

After polls close, election officials determine the voter's registration status.

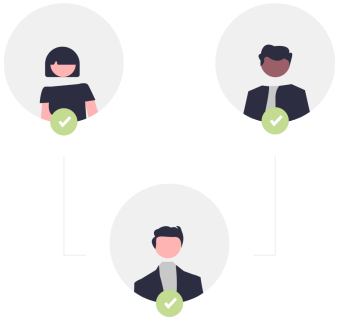
If the voter was registered on Election Day, the ballot is removed from the secrecy envelope and counted like any other.

If the voter was not registered, the ballot remains sealed and is not counted.

The diagram also shows a contrasting path for voters whose names do appear on the registration list—they vote normally, and their ballots are immediately counted.

## Why Make Voting More Convenient?

The rationale for convenience voting reflects the assumption that voting is costly and that participation can be increased by reducing the cost (Blais et al. 2019). There are also embedded normative assumptions that increasing voter turnout is a positive outcome (Gronke et al., 2008). There is some evidence to indicate that reducing travel distance can increase turnout (Garnett & Grogan,  2021), as does reducing voting time (Herron & Smith, 2016), and the expansion of mail voting (Bonica et al., 2021). Convenience voting is also positioned as a mechanism to reduce turnout inequality by increasing turnout among voters from disadvantaged groups (Bonica et al., 2021). It is likely that support for convenience voting will continue to grow.



# 6.4 Chapter Summary

## Real Life Example: How long will it take to vote?

The US Center for Voting Excellence created a voting-time estimator tool for American voters to determine how long it will take to complete their ballot. Use the tool to calculate how long it would take to fill out the sample ballot below using a hand-marked paper ballot:

**OFFICIAL BALLOT**

Judge: _____

Judge: _____

**GENERAL ELECTION**

**LOREM EPSUM, LOREMVILLE**

**JUNE 23, 2025**

### Instructions to Voters:

To vote, completely fill in the oval(s) next to your choice(s) like this:

| State Offices | FEDERAL OFFICES | INITIATIVES AND POLICIES |
|---|---|---|
| ***GOVERNOR***<br>**SELECT ONE** | ***HOUSE OF DELEGATES DISTRICT 78***<br>**SELECT ONE** | Failure to vote on a constitutional amendment will have the same effect as voting no for the amendment. |
| ◯ **ALEXANDRA HAYES**<br>Democratic | ◯ **REENA PERSAUD**<br>Democratic | To vote for a proposed constitutional amendment, completely fill in the oval next to the word "YES" for that question. To vote against a proposed constitutional amendment, completely fill in the oval next to the word "NO" for that question. |
| ◯ **BENJAMIN CARTER**<br>Republican | ◯ **QUINN PARKER**<br>Republican | |
| ◯ **EVELYN MITCHELL**<br>Independent | ◯ _____<br>***write-in, if any*** | |

_____

*write-in, if any*

***Lieutenant Governor***

**select one**

**ISABELLA MARTINEZ**

Democratic

**CLINT BOSTOCK**

Republican

**LIAM ROBINSON**

Independent

_____

*write-in, if any*

***ATTORNEY GENERAL***

**SELECT ONE**

**DAVIS DAVIDSON III**

Republican

**KATHERINE LEE**

Independent

**CITY OFFICES**

***CITY OF LOREM EPSUM***

***CITY TREASURER***

**SELECT ONE**

**GRACE WILLIAMS-DOBBS**

Democratic

_____

*write-in, if any*

***TOWN WASTEWATER COMMISSION***

**SELECT THREE OF THE FOLLOWING:**

**MADELINE CLARK**

**NATHANIEL SCOTT**

**OLIVIA TURNER**

**PATRICK HARRIS, JR**

**REBECCA ADAMS**

**SAMUEL WRIGHT**

**DO YOU SUPPORT REPEALING PROPOSITION 35?**

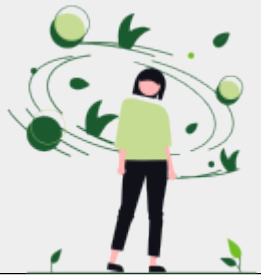
***YES***

***NO***

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| _____<br>*write-in, if any* | VICTORIA EVANS | |
| | _____<br>*write-in, if any* | |
| | _____<br>*write-in, if any* | |
| | _____<br>*write-in, if any* | |

## What do you think?

- What do you think of the time estimate? Is it shorter or longer than you expected?
- Does changing the voting style make a difference?



## Chapter Summary

- Casting a vote involves choosing a voting location, verifying identity, marking the ballot, and submitting it in a polling station designed for efficiency, accessibility, security, privacy, and transparency.
- Wait times vary by location and are influenced by ballot complexity and polling station availability; longer waits can reduce future turnout.
- Voting technology has evolved from mechanical systems to modern tools like Ballot Marking Devices (BMDs) and Direct Recording Electronic (DRE) systems.
- BMDs allow voters to use a digital interface to mark selections and print a paper ballot, while DRE systems electronically record votes and often include a paper audit trail.
- Hand-marked paper ballots remain the most common voting method because they are tangible, reliable, and easy to audit.
- Convenience voting options such as advance voting, absentee voting, and vote-by-mail aim to reduce barriers and make voting more accessible.
- Provisional ballots allow individuals with uncertain eligibility to vote conditionally, with their vote counted after verification.
- Expanding convenience voting is viewed as a strategy to increase voter turnout and reduce inequality by making voting easier for all, especially marginalized groups.

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OpenAI. (2025, June 12th). ChatGPT. [Large language model]. https://www.chatgpt.com Prompt: Can you please summarize the passage into 8 key points with no additional bullets. *Edited & Reviewed by author.*

## Key Terms

- **Absent or Absentee Voting**: Voting by individuals who are not present at their regular polling place on election day, typically by mail or other remote methods.
- **Accessibility**: The degree to which a voting location accommodates all voters, including those with disabilities or mobility issues.
- **Advance Voting**: A form of convenience voting where voters can cast their ballots at designated times before election day.
- **Ballot Marking Device (BMD)**: An electronic device that allows voters to make their selections on a digital interface, which then prints a paper record of the vote. The vote is not stored on the device.
- **Convenience voting**: Voting methods that provide flexibility outside of traditional in-person, election-day voting. This includes early voting, absentee voting, and voting by mail.
- **Direct Recording Electronic (DRE) systems**: Voting machines that use a touchscreen or similar interface to directly record votes into electronic memory. These systems may also produce a paper audit trail for verification.
- **Efficiency**: In the voting context, the smooth and timely movement of voters through the polling station reduces wait times and improves the experience.
- **Provisional ballots**: Ballots cast by voters whose eligibility is uncertain at the time of voting. These ballots are held aside and only counted once eligibility is verified.
- **Transparency**: Making the voting process observable and understandable to increase public trust, such as allowing voters to see their ballot being submitted.
- **Voter-Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT)**: A physical printout produced by an electronic voting machine that allows the voter to verify their selections before the vote is stored electronically

# CHAPTER 7: COUNTING VOTES

## Chapter Overview




*Photo by Glen Carrie, Unsplash License.*

# 7.0 Introduction

In December 2024, five long weeks after election day, the state of California finally completed counting the 16 million votes cast in the 2024 general election (La, 2025). Meanwhile, in the 2025 Ontario Provincial election, voters could see results within minutes of polls closing. Not long after 9:00 pm, voters knew Premier Ford would be reelected. Why the discrepancy? Why does California take so long to count votes? Conversely, how can Ontario election workers count 5 million votes in a few hours? The differences lie in the process used to count votes, which is something we will explore in this section.

## Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Recall the steps involved in counting votes and reporting results
- Explain the record-keeping and reporting practices used to maintain accuracy
- Describe when a recount might take place

## Things we need to know

In this chapter, you can expect to encounter the following terms/concepts.

- Processing
- Tabulating
- Rejected Ballots
- Recount

# 7.1 Manual Counting

When voting hours conclude and voting locations close, election workers can breathe a sigh of relief. Or can they? After voting ends, another monumental task begins – counting the votes. Vote counting procedures can vary across countries – and even within them – yet the process typically follows a predictable series of steps: **tabulating**, accumulating, and reporting.

## Tabulating Votes

The physical counting of votes, called **tabulating**, can happen using several methods. Tabulating processes can differ based on how the votes are counted, when the votes are counted, and even where they are counted.

## Before Counting Begins

Before counting begins, there may be preparatory actions required before ballots can be tabulated, such as removing security seals to open ballot boxes (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-h). **Processing** or **pre-canvassing** may also involve preparing absentee ballots for counting, such as unfolding them or removing privacy sleeves (NCSL, 2024). Once preparation is complete, the actual counting of votes can begin. This can be manual or computer-assisted.

## Manual Counting

Single-member plurality systems with simple ballot designs, such as Canada's, tabulate ballots by hand. Manual counting is conducted by election officials, such as a deputy returning officer, and it is observed by representatives of the respective candidates or political parties (Elections Canada, 2025, March 7). With manual counting, election officials have to make determinations about the validity of a ballot. In Canada, ballots are determined to be invalid if there are markings outside the designated space (Elections Canada, 2025, March 7). The image below provides some examples.

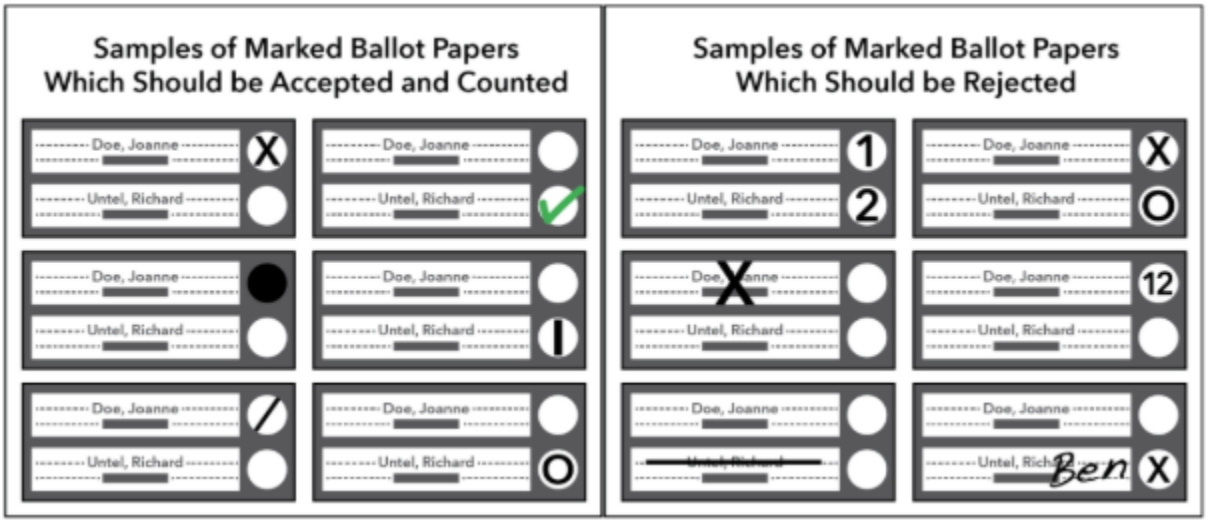
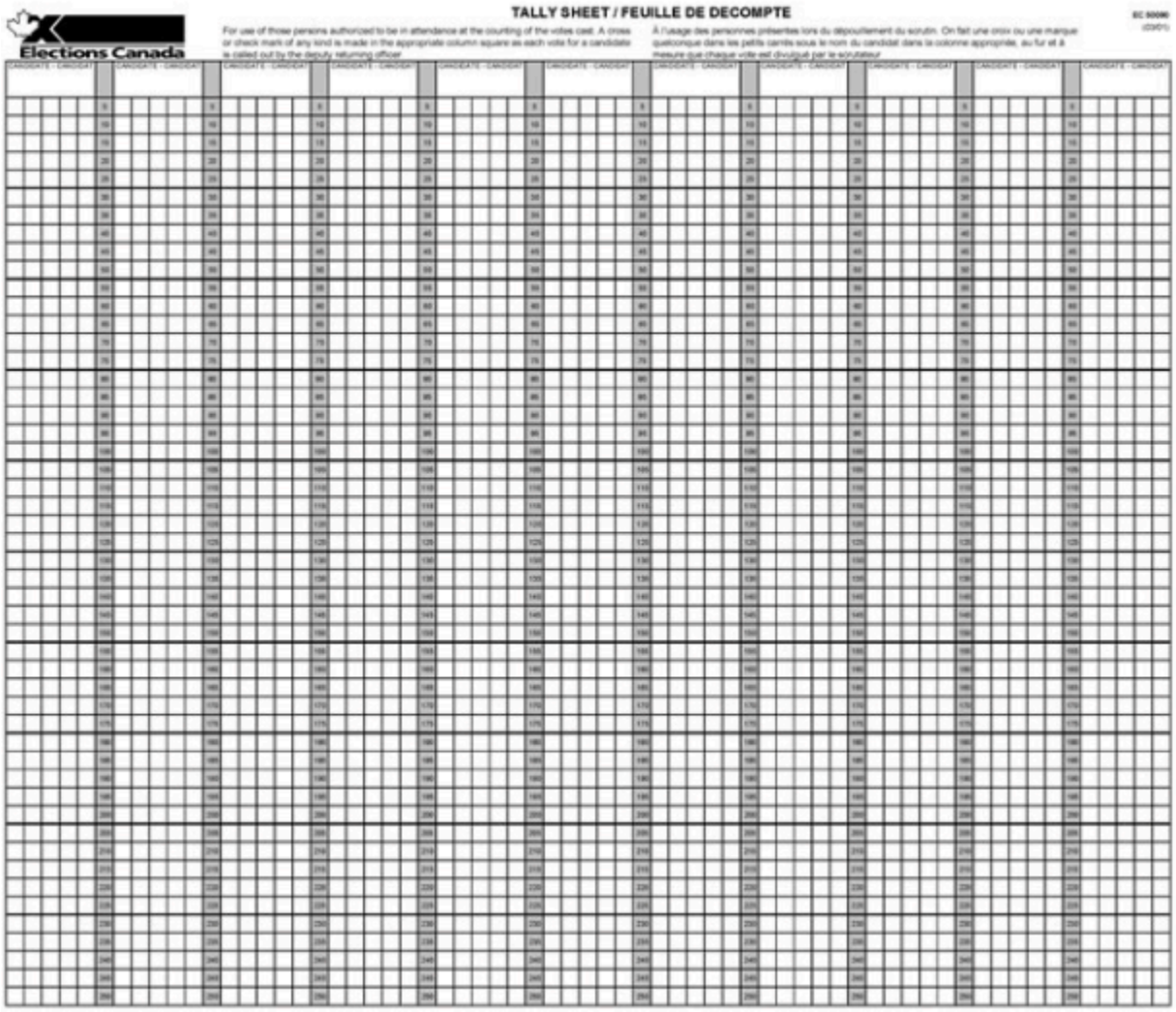



*Image in Deputy Returning Officer & Poll Clerk Guidebook[PDF] by Elections Canada , p. 13, Non-commercial Reproduction.*

The counting proceeds with each ballot being shown to observers, identified as a valid vote, and then recorded on a tally sheet, which is shown in the image below.




*Example of Tally Sheet. "Form 3 – Tally Sheet" by Elections Canada, Non-Commercial Reproduction.*

Image Description

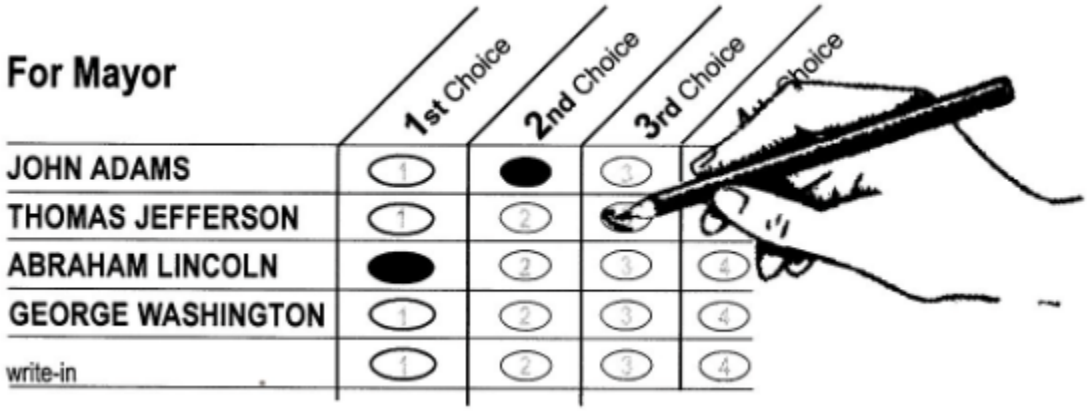
This is a sample tally sheet for use in the counting of the votes. It has a column for each candidate in the electoral district, with rows of squares below in increments of 5. When the deputy returning officer calls out a vote for a candidate, the person using the tally sheet marks a square in the appropriate column to keep count of the votes.

Manual counting is effective and transparent, but it can quickly become unworkable with larger electorates and more complex ballot designs.

# 7.2 Computer Assisted Counting

Systems using more complex ballots, such as the United States, can take longer to count. **Optical scan ballot tabulators** can be used to help speed up the process. Electronic tabulators are more efficient and more accurate than manual counting (Thomas et al., 2022). These machines can be hand-fed, where election workers feed the ballot into the tabulator at the time of voting, or they can be batch-fed, where election workers can feed multiple ballots into the machine for counting.

Ontario was the first Canadian province to adopt optical scan ballot tabulators (Smartmatic, 2023). In America, over 90% of counties use some type of electronic tabulation (Verified Voting, 2025). Machine tabulators use **Optical Mark Reading (OMR)** technology, allowing the machine to easily recognize simple ballot markings (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-e).




*"Hand Marking Ranked Ballot" by Tbouricius, Public Domain.*

Ballots that require voters to write in preferences or use alpha-numeric characters to rank candidates are not suited for OMR tabulation technology.

### Rejected Ballots

Generally, computer-assisted counting can provide a layer of objectivity not present with manual counting. However, there are times when an errant ballot marking could cause a ballot to be rejected by the machine. When this happens, tabulation procedures often allow election workers to examine the ballot and determine the voter's intent. If the intent is clear, election officials will prepare a replacement ballot to register the voter's preference (Haldimand County, 2018). The **rejected ballot** is discarded.

## Counting Delays

On election night, media outlets report preliminary vote totals as they are published by election officials. These results offer an incomplete picture – one that can change quickly as new votes are added to the tally.  Variation in counting procedures can give the impression that a candidate is leading and is overtaken by another candidate. This apparent increase in vote totals as more votes are counted is known as 'the gain' (Foley, 2013).

## Americas Blue Shifts

Since the 2000 election, there has been a partisan difference in propensity to cast an absentee ballot, with Democratic voters being more likely to vote by mail (Allen, 2024). As a result, differences in counting procedures can give the impression that the republicans (represented by the colour red) are leading early in the evening – sometimes called a **red mirage**, only to see the lead disappear as more absentee ballots are counted – sometimes called a **blue shift** (Foley & Stewart, 2020). The shift is a product of differential counting procedures across states, specifically related to the counting of mail ballots. Florida, for example, allows counting of mail ballots prior to election day, whereas Minnesota does not (NCSL, 2024).

### Further Reading

If you'd like a more detailed explanation of the Blue Shift, read What Blue and Red 'Shifts' Looked Like in Every State

It is important to remember that election returns reported by the media are unofficial tallies of votes counted (Curiel et al., 2021). After the initial round of counting, preliminary results must be compiled and verified. That's what we will look at next.

# 7.3 Records & Reporting

Election officials keep meticulous records. Accurate records are essential for maintaining an accurate count (and potential **recounts**) and for ensuring public confidence in the electoral process. For instance, **ballot reconciliation** is a process used to verify that the number of ballots issued equals the number of ballots cast. Election officials also track ballots that were spoiled or damaged to ensure that the correct number of ballots is accounted for (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-i)

After tabulating is complete, the results are sent to a central reporting authority, such as a chief returning officer. This can happen electronically by uploading totals to an Election Management System (MIT, 2021). In Canada, reporting is done using a statement of the vote form (Elections Canada, 2025, March 7) shown in the image below.

Elections Canada

## Statement of the Vote

**Purpose**: To record information about the ballots and results at the polling station at the end of election day.

## Relevé du scrutin

**Objectif** : Consigner des informations sur les bulletins de vote et les résultats au bureau de scrutin à la fin du jour de l'élection.

EC 50100
(07/2020)

| Electoral district / Circonscription | Polling station no.<br>N° du bureau de scrutin | Date |
|---|---|---|
| | | |

Ballots counted for each candidate
Bulletins de vote comptés en faveur de chaque candidat

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| A | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| B | Valid votes cast / Votes valides déposés **Total** | |
| C | Rejected ballots / Bulletins rejetés | |
| D | Total votes cast / Total des votes déposés (B) + (C) **Total** | |
| E | Spoiled ballots / Bulletins annulés | |
| F | Unused ballots / Bulletins inutilisés | |
| G | (D) + (E) + (F) **Total** | |

Reporting telephone no.
N° de téléphone pour communiquer les résultats

Number of electors on the List who voted
Nombre d'électeurs inscrits sur la liste qui ont voté

1

Total ballots supplied
Total des bulletins de vote fournis

2

Election Officer 1 / Fonctionnaire électoral 1

Election Officer 2 / Fonctionnaire électoral 2

**Witness signatures / Signatures des témoins**

Print name / Nom (en lettres moulées)

Print name / Nom (en lettres moulées)

Print name / Nom (en lettres moulées)

Signature

Signature

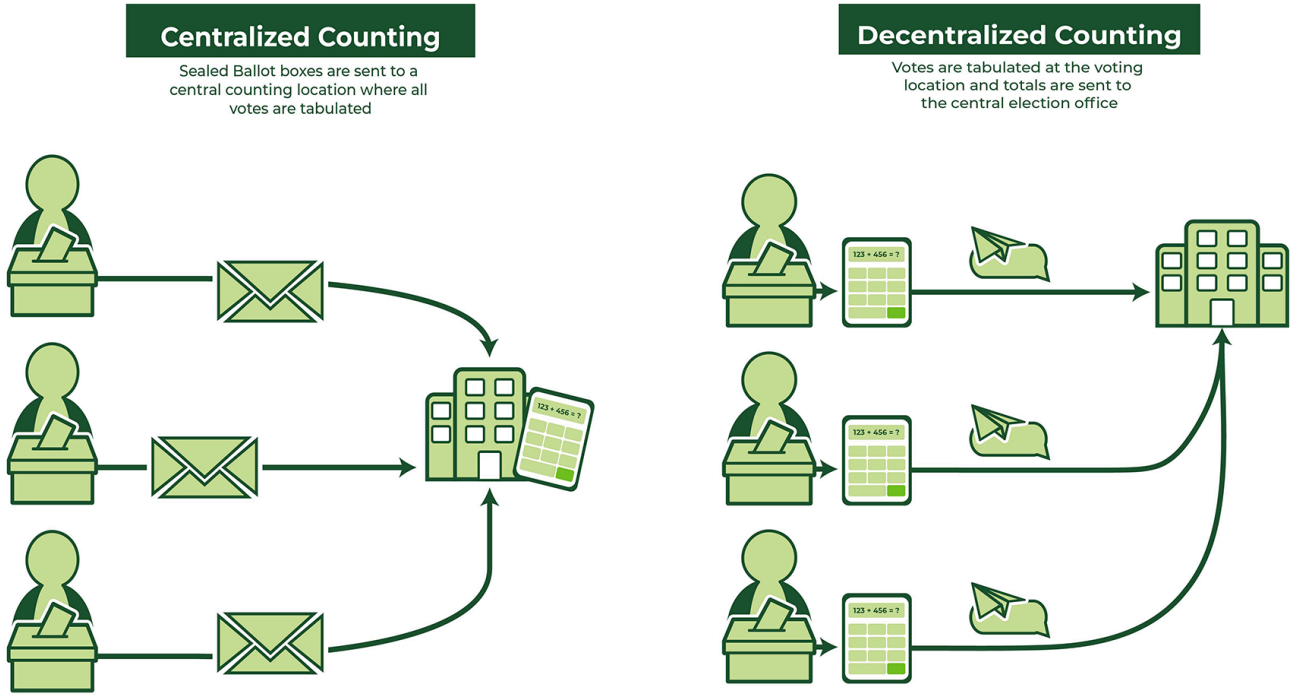
Signature

*"Form 4 – Statement of the Vote" by Elections Canada, Non-commercial Reproduction.*

Image Description
This is a sample statement of the vote for a polling station, which is completed by the deputy returning officer after the ballots are counted. It lists the number of votes cast for each candidate as well as the number of electors who voted, total valid votes, rejected ballots, spoiled ballots and unused ballots. It captures basic tracking information and must be signed by two election officers. It may be signed by candidates' representatives.
Central election administrators will compile and verify results to ensure that totals from all voting locations have been added correctly. In American elections, this process is called a **canvas**, which "refers to the collection and reconciliation of all ballot materials used during an election" (Thomas & Weil, 2021).

## Communicating Interim Results

The communication process for publishing results will differ depending on whether the tabulating happens locally or at a central location. If votes are counted locally at the voting location, poll workers will tabulate the votes and communicate the totals to the Electoral Management Body (EMB) for publication, often on a government website. Alternatively, unopened ballot boxes might be transported to a central counting facility where the votes are tabulated before being sent to the EMB.




*"Decentralized vs Centralized Counting" by Koen Liddiard, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

Image Description
On the left, titled "Centralized Counting," voters place ballots into sealed envelopes, which are sent to a central

counting location where all votes are tabulated. Arrows point from three voter stations to a central building with a calculator icon, indicating centralized tabulation.

On the right, titled “Decentralized Counting,” votes are tabulated at each voting location using calculators, and the totals are then electronically sent to a central election office. Arrows flow from each voting station with a calculator and paper plane icon to a central building, indicating decentralized reporting of totals.
The results published on election night are only preliminary. Outstanding absentee ballots may need to be counted, and any recounts must be performed. For election officials, the election night results will – ideally – include as many votes as possible. It’s also imperative for the EMB and news outlets to include cautionary language emphasizing the preliminary nature of the results (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-i). The public may begin to question the legitimacy of the counting process if there are large discrepancies between the interim totals and the final results.

## Communicating Final Results

Before the digital age, official election results were made available by posting a paper printout on an office door or bulletin board, and relying on a news wire service, such as the Associated Press (AP) for distribution (MIT, 2021). Today, election results are primarily shared digitally or posted on election websites. The final results may take several weeks to determine, which is necessary for allowing sufficient time to verify the vote totals submitted, to conclude any recounts, and to physically receive all ballots (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-i).

# 7.4 Recounts

Humans make mistakes. Especially when performing repetitive, monotonous tasks that strain the limits of attention and concentration. When manually counting votes, election workers can make addition errors or even place vote tallies in the wrong column (Ilanbey, 2025). When there are concerns about the accuracy of the results, a **recount** can be conducted.

## Types of Recounts

**Candidate-initiated recounts** can be requested by a candidate. This may require a formal, written notification to the EMB. **Automatic** or **mandatory** recounts are conducted in close races where the margin of victory falls within a specific range (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-i).

## Judicial Recounts

In Canada, a Judicial Recount is a recount overseen by a judge. These are triggered by an apparent tie, when two or more candidates have the same number of votes, or when the difference between the two Candidates is less than 0.1% of the total votes cast (Elections Canada, 2025, April 30). In judicial recounts, the judge merely oversees the counting process.

> *"A judicial recount is a formal means of verifying the count of the votes cast for an electoral district. It is presided over by a judge of a superior court who sits in the electoral district where the election results are validated."*
>
> – Elections Canada, Judicial Recount Handbook

### Example: Recount in Terrebonne

In the 2025 Canadian federal election, the results in one riding swung back and forth until a judicial recount found the final margin of victory to be a single vote!

#### April 28

After tabulating the ballots on election night, the Liberal candidate was projected to win by 35 votes. Election results are unofficial until they can be validated by Elections Canada (Major, 2025).

#### May 7

The post-election **validation process** verifies the number submitted by each voting station. After validation, the Bloc candidate was leading by 44 votes. This close margin automatically triggered a judicial recount (Elections Canada, 2025).

#### May 10

A judicial recount conducted by a Quebec Superior Court Judge certified the vote totals with a single vote being the decisive margin (Lopez Steven, 2025).

## Control & Custody

For effective, transparent recounts, election officials must be able to verify a **chain of custody** for completed ballots and other election materials. The chain of custody "refers to the processes, or paper trail, that documents the transfer of materials from one person (or place) to the next" (Thomas & Weil, 2021). These procedures might include numbered and signed security seals for ballot boxes and other election records to prevent unauthorized access.

# 7.5 Chapter Summary

## Real Life Example: Does this Vote Count?

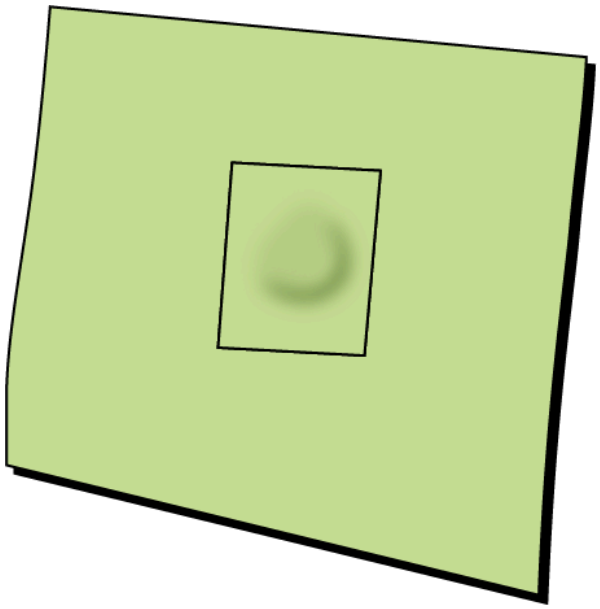

*"Looking for hanging chad, 2000 Presidential election" by Alan Diaz, Public Domain*

American elections no longer use punch-card voting machines, largely because of the recounts in the state of Florida during the 2000 Presidential election. With the margins close enough to necessitate recounts, attention was focused on the outdated punch card voting machines in use at the time. After being punched, the tiny pieces of paper called **chads** would accumulate in the machine.

The jammed voting machines would make it difficult for voters to fully punch through their ballot. This made it difficult for recount officials who had to determine the intention of the voter.

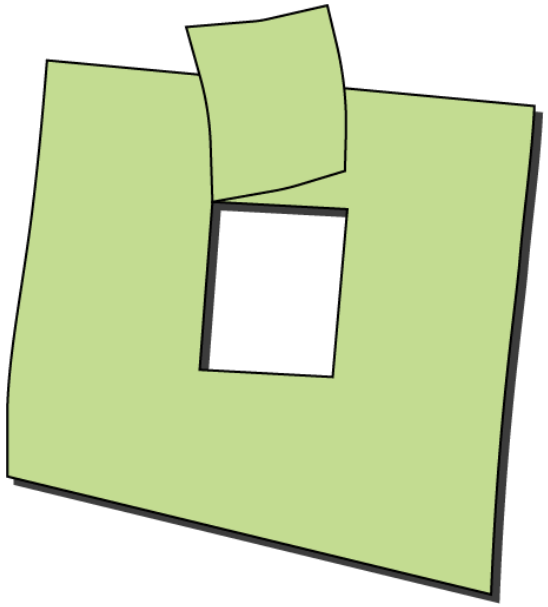
Try the quiz below to see how you would do.

*"A chad jam in a Votomatic punch, seen from behind" by Douglas W. Jones. Used under FDEd(Can).*



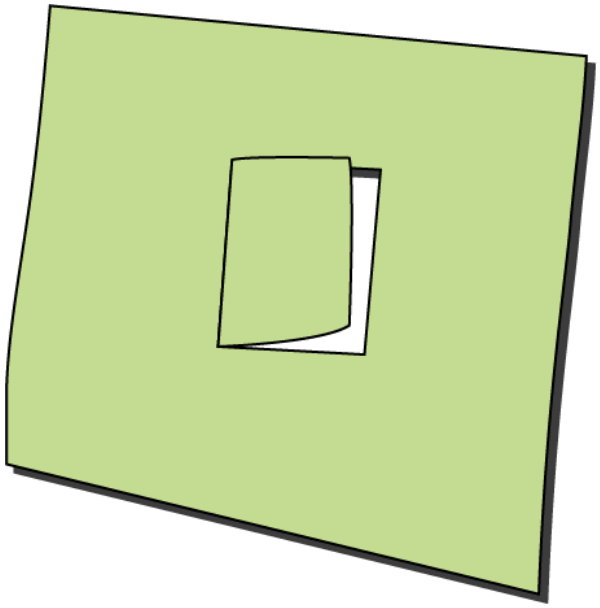
This is a Dimpled Chad.
It is indented but still fully attached to the ballot.

- **It is not counted as a vote.**



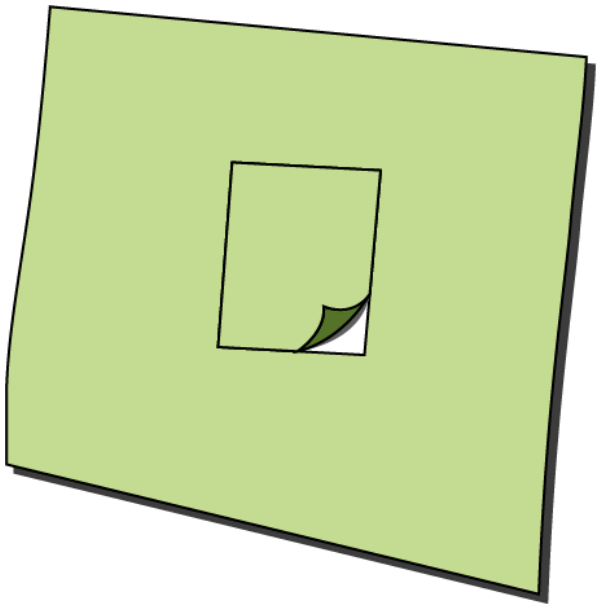
This is a Hanging Door Chad.
One corner is still attached to the ballot.

- **It is counted as a vote.**



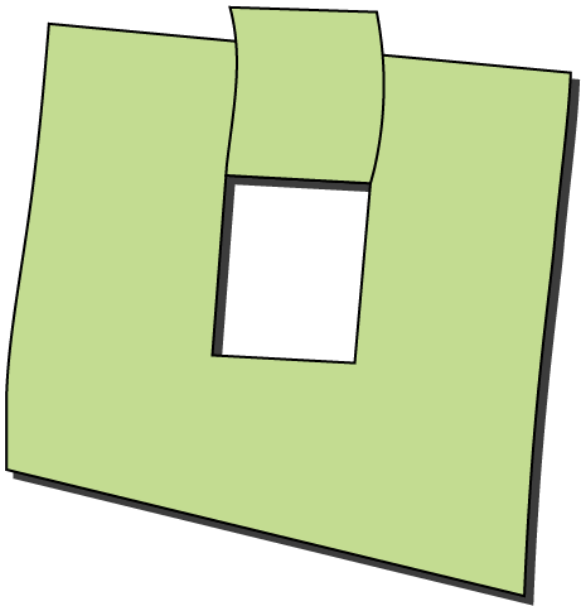
This is a Swinging Door Chad.
Two corners are still attached to the ballot.

- **It is counted as a vote.**



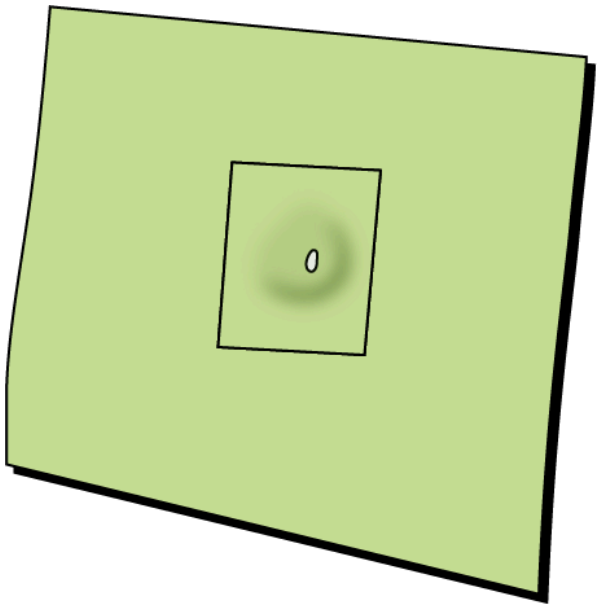
This is a Tri Chad.
Three corners are still attached to the ballot.

- **It is counted as a vote.**



This is a Swinging Door Chad.
Two corners are still attached to the ballot.

- **It is counted as a vote.**



This is a Pregnant Chad.
It is pierced but still fully attached to the ballot.

- **It is not counted as a vote.**

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter,

- Vote counting varies greatly by region, with some areas like California taking weeks due to complex processes, while others like Ontario deliver results within hours because of streamlined methods and efficient technology.
- Manual counting is common in systems with simple ballots, such as in Canada, where each vote is reviewed and tallied by hand in a transparent process involving election officials and observers.
- Computer-assisted tabulation using Optical Mark Recognition (OMR) is used for complex ballots, improving speed and accuracy. However, improperly marked ballots may be rejected and manually reviewed to determine voter intent.
- Variations in when and how votes are counted can cause misleading early results, including the "red mirage" and "blue shift" phenomena in U.S. elections, due to differences in absentee ballot counting procedures.
- Accurate record keeping is critical, including reconciling the number of ballots issued and cast, and reporting results through centralized systems. Election returns go through verification stages before being finalized.
- Interim results shared on election night are preliminary, and final certified results may take weeks to confirm due to absentee ballots, recounts, and the need for data verification and chain of custody assurance.
- Recounts occur when results are extremely close or errors are suspected, and may be triggered automatically or requested by candidates. In Canada, judicial recounts are conducted under a judge's supervision for formal accuracy.
- Historical issues, like the 2000 U.S. election punch card controversy, have shaped current practices. Transparent, verifiable processes—manual or digital—are essential for public trust in the legitimacy of election results.

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OpenAI. (2025, June 16th). ChatGPT. [Large language model]. https://www.chatgpt.com Prompt: Can you please summarize the passage into 8 key points with no additional bullets. *Edited & Reviewed by author.*

## Key Terms

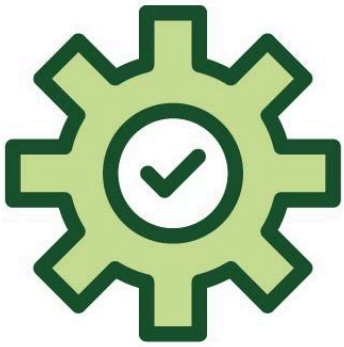
- **Automatic or mandatory recounts** are voting recounts conducted in close races where the margin of victory falls within a specific range.
- **Ballot Reconciliation** is a process used to verify that the number of ballots issued equals the number of ballots cast.
- **Blue Shift** happens when Democratic candidates (blue) gain ground after Election Day as more mail-in, provisional, or absentee ballots are processed and added to the vote count.
- **Candidate-initiated recounts** are voting recounts requested by a candidate
- **Chain of Custody** "refers to the processes, or paper trail, that documents the transfer of materials from one person (or place) to the next" (Thomas & Weil, 2021).
- **Optical Mark Reading (OMR)** – is a technology used to detect and interpret marks made on paper forms, typically with a pencil or pen.
- **Optical Scan Ballot Tabulators** – are electronic voting machines that read and count paper ballots marked by voters
- **Processing –** The initial steps taken to prepare ballots for counting, such as verifying voter eligibility, opening envelopes, or unfolding absentee ballots before tabulation.
- **Recount –** A repeated count of votes, often initiated when results are very close or disputed, to verify the accuracy of the original count.
- **Red Mirage** – refers to a situation where early election results show Republican candidates (represented by red) in the lead because in-person, Election Day votes are counted first and tend to favour Republicans.
- **Rejected Ballot –** Ballots that are not counted because they are improperly marked, damaged, or otherwise deemed invalid according to electoral rules.
- **Tabulating –** The act of counting and recording votes from ballots, either manually by election workers or using machines.

## Further Reading & Resources

If you'd like to learn more about this topic, check out the following resources:

- How Votes Are Counted in Canada [YouTube]
- FAQs: Counting and Results from Elections Canada

# PART 3: PERFORMANCE



How can we tell if an election was a success? Few people can adequately assess electoral performance outside of realizing their preferred outcome. But when the outcome was not desired, voters must trust that the process was conducted with fairness and transparency.

# CHAPTER 8: ELECTION OUTCOMES

## Chapter Outline




*"GA77 New Platform of Women Leaders meets at UN General Assembly" by UN Women, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.*

# 8.0 Introduction

*"The Lower House – Parliament House – Lok Sabha" by Soham Banerjee, CC BY 2.0*

Elections in India are a monumental feat of logistics that defies comprehension. The election happens in seven waves over multiple weeks, and in 2024, over 600 million voters cast votes to elect 543 members of the lower chamber, called the Lok Sabha (Election Commission of India, n.d.). It's an astounding effort, yet the government it produces isn't necessarily representative of the greater population (Verma, 2024). Women are underrepresented compared to their proportion of the population, as are certain classes of India's caste system (Verniers, 2024), and entire regions of the country (Vaishnav & Hintson, 2019). Governments in India also have a tendency to pass laws that people don't like (Bhardwaj & Jadhav, 2024). Given those factors, can the election really be considered a success?

Many countries face similar challenges. There is sometimes a disconnect between the electoral system and the effectiveness of the governments it produces. Elections must successfully balance the need for responsiveness, representativeness, and citizen satisfaction. That's what we will explore in this section.

## Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain how electoral systems are linked to governance
- Compare different electoral rules for increasing the representation of women
- Describe how electoral rules can impact voter turnout

## Things we need to know

In this chapter, you can expect to encounter the following terms/concepts.

- Responsiveness
- Representativeness

# 8.1 Election Results

When do we know if an election was good? How can we be sure an electoral system is effective? What factors help us determine whether voters are satisfied with their country's electoral system? By definition, those are subjective assessments and could be influenced or biased by the perspective of the observer. In this section, we will explore different approaches to thinking about election results. Several questions will be considered:

- What type of governments does an election tend to produce?
- Do elections produce governments that are representative?
- Are citizens satisfied with the electoral process?

Elections aren't just venues for political competition, but they are also political issues themselves. They represent value judgments about who can vote, how often, who wins and loses, and who gets represented in the government. Gallagher & Mitchell (2005) are worth quoting at length from their work comparing electoral systems:

> *They may make a big difference to the shape of the party system, to the nature of government (coalition or single-party), to the kind of choices facing voters at elections, to the ability of voters to hold their representative(s) personally accountable, to the behaviour of parliamentarians, to the degree to which a parliament contains people from all walks of life and backgrounds, to the extent of democracy and cohesion within political parties, and, of course, to the quality of government, and hence to the quality of life of the citizens ruled by that government (pg 5).*

As examined in previous chapters, the parts and processes of elections take multiple forms. Those structural differences can lead to drastic differences in electoral outcomes and government performance. We will begin this chapter by examining how different electoral rules can produce different types of governments

# 8.2 Elections and Governance

Elections are a process for turning public preference into a government. That government will pass laws, raise taxes, and implement public policy. The government's ability to fulfil those functions might be a product of the electoral rules. For example, does the government involve one party or two? Is the government representative of the voters' preferences? And is it responsive to public opinion? These are types of outcome-oriented indicators that can be used to analyze election performance (Daoust & Nadeau, 2023).

### Responsiveness

**Responsiveness** is when governments make laws and implement policies that are in line with the preferences of voters (Blais & Bol, 2023).

### Government Structure

How does the electoral system relate to the policies implemented by the government? It may be due to the kind of government produced by the system. Factors such as ballot structure and electoral formula can have direct impacts on the party competition and the behaviour of politicians (Lijphart, 1990). Since plurality and majority systems tend to produce governments where a single party controls the legislature, that party will be more able to pass laws (Grofman & Lijphart, 1986). By contrast, proportional systems tend to produce coalition governments, which require compromises between parties. These inter-party negotiations may make it difficult for parties to implement their priorities (Blais & Bol, 2023).

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Plurality and Majority Systems | Single-Party Majority Governments | Easier to pass laws |
| Proportional Systems | Multiparty Coalition Governments | Passing laws is more difficult |

Within this framework, it's possible that plurality and majoritarian systems might be deemed more responsive, since they face fewer obstacles in implementing their agenda.

## Responding to Public Opinion

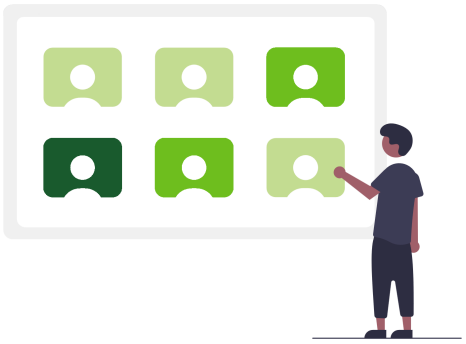
When an election produces a government that is responsive, we are referring to the tendency of the government to pass laws that the voters want. A government can be considered responsive if the policies implemented align with public opinion. For example, research in the United States suggests that, over time, government policies tend to reflect the will of the voters (measured through public opinion surveys) and that

public opinion tends to move before public policy (Paige & Shapiro, 1983). American governments generally seem to do what the voters want.

Governments in PR systems could face challenges responding to public opinion, given the likelihood of a coalition with multiple parties. For example, a larger party might grant concessions to a smaller party in order to form a government (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-b). This dynamic, often present in Israel, may run in the opposite direction to public opinion by adopting the policy preference of fringe parties. Alternatively, research from the Netherlands found that stable coalition governments produced by their PR system were more responsive to public opinion than those in the United Kingdom's plurality system (McGann et al., 2023). The frequent turnover from one majority government to the next in the UK led to big shifts in policy to the point of overcorrecting.

# 8.3 Elections and Representation

When the electoral system turns votes into seats, the elected government should reflect the people it represents. This is known as the concept of **representativeness**. There can be several aspects to this. First, the composition of the government should be in line with the partisan preferences of the electorate. Second, the government should, in some manner, represent the social, economic, and demographic characteristics of the population, often called **descriptive representation** (Blais & Bol, 2023).



## Proportionality

The idea of **proportionality** concerns whether voter preferences are represented in the legislature in proportion to their prevalence in the electorate (Bochsler et al., 2024). While there are complicated statistical approaches to measuring proportionality, the most intuitive way to think about it is to compare the percentage of votes to the percentage of seats. In simple terms, a system would be considered representative if a party getting 30% of the popular vote would win 30% of the seats in government. Proportional systems are designed around this principle, but plurality and majority systems don't always produce proportionate results:

### Ontario's Disproportionate Elections

In the 2025 provincial election in Ontario, several parties won seats that were not proportional to their share of the vote. For example, the Liberal Party of Ontario received almost 30% of the popular vote, yet only won 11% of the seats. By contrast, the Progressive Conservative party won almost 65% of the seats from receiving 43% of the vote. Hypothetically, under a PR system, the disproportionality would be reduced.

**(Fair Vote Canada, 2025)**

| Party | Popular Vote% | Seats Won | Seats Using PR (hypothetical) |
|---|---|---|---|
| PC | 43 | 80 | 55 |
| LPO | 29.9 | 14 | 38 |
| NDP | 19.6 | 27 | 24 |
| Green | 4.8 | 2 | 6 |

In general, proportional systems tend to be more representative than plurality or majority systems (Blais & Bol, 2023). They also produce more parties in the legislature, measured as the **effective number of parties in parliament (ENPP)** (Grofman & Lijphart, 1986). In plurality and majority systems with fewer parties in parliament, voters who support smaller parties are less likely to see them represented in the legislature. These

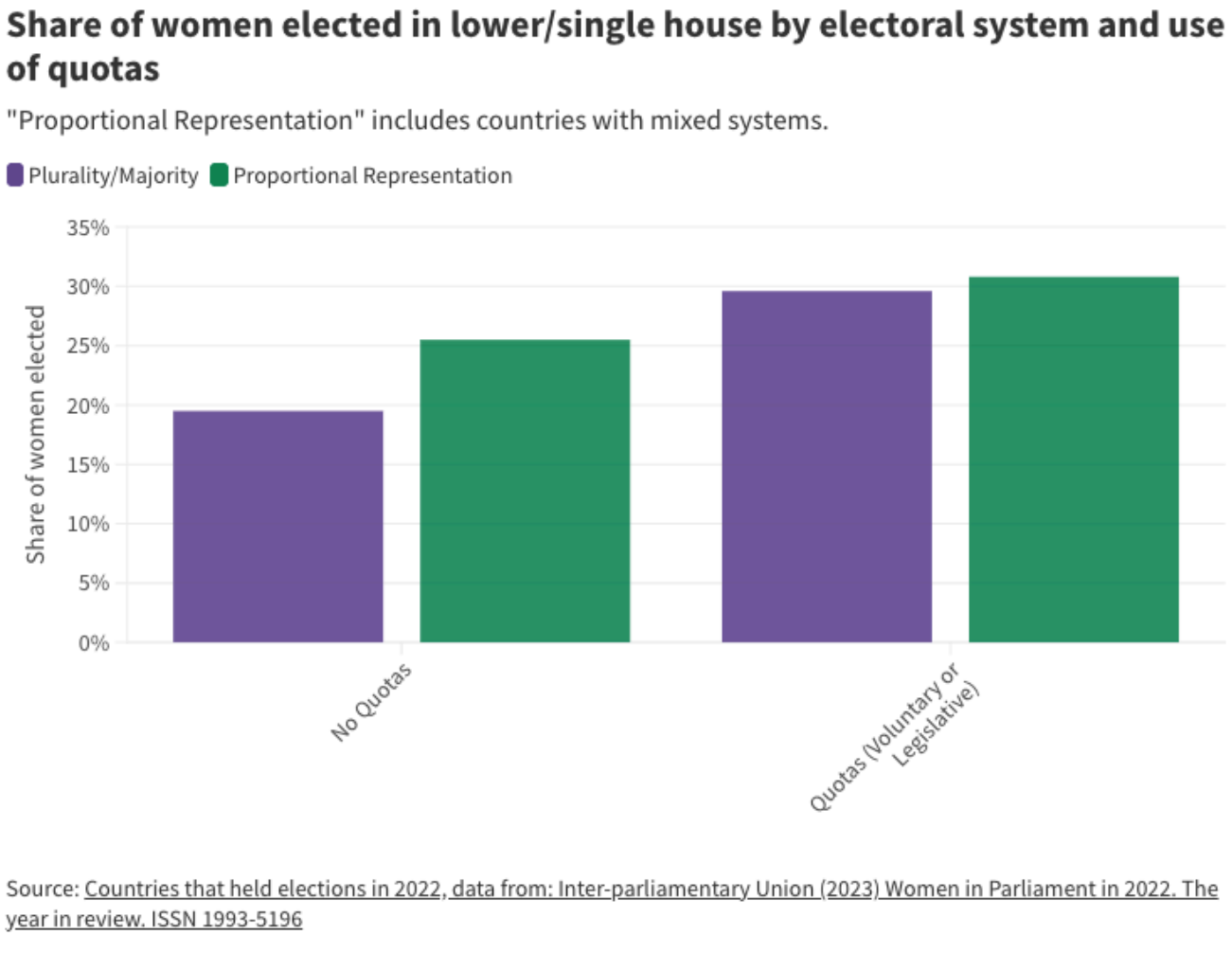
disproportionate outcomes can cause dissatisfaction with the political process, sometimes prompting calls for electoral reform (Wilks-Heeg & Crone, 2011).

## Descriptive Representation

One common indicator used to measure descriptive representation is to compare the percentage of women represented in legislatures. The Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) tracks data on representation in parliaments around the world. Globally, women hold only 27% of all seats in lower or unicameral chambers (IPU Parline, 2025). Those numbers are only slightly higher in the Americas, 35% and in Europe, 31% (IPU Parline, 2025).

## Electoral Rules and Gender

Countries that use systems of proportional representation tend to elect more women to parliament than plurality/majority systems (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-f). According to 2022 data, the representation of women in legislatures is 6 percentage points higher in countries that use proportional systems compared to those using FPTP (Ridley-Castle, 2023). Additionally, some countries may enforce quotas or reserve legislative seats for women.




*"Share of Women Elected in Lower/Single House by Electoral System and Use of Quotas" by Thea Ridley-Castle, FDEd(Can).*

Image Description
Bar chart titled “Share of women elected in lower/single house by electoral system and use of quotas.” It compares the percentage of women elected in countries with two electoral systems: Plurality/Majority (purple bars) and Proportional Representation (green bars), with and without gender quotas.

- Under “No Quotas,” about 20% of women are elected in Plurality/Majority systems and about 26% in Proportional Representation systems.
- Under “Quotas (Voluntary or Legislative),” about 29% of women are elected in Plurality/Majority systems and about 31% in Proportional Representation systems.

A note explains that “Proportional Representation” includes countries with mixed electoral systems.

## Districts and Lists

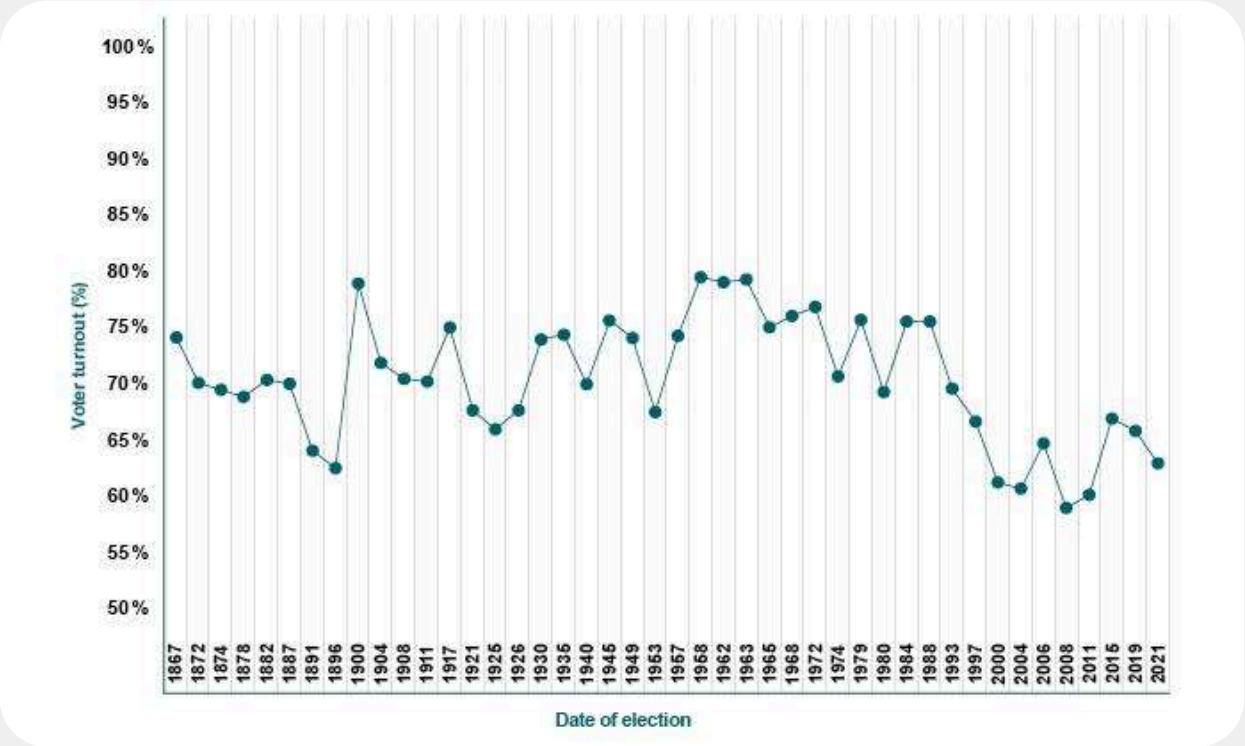
Within PR systems, the representation of women can be affected by differences in **district magnitude** and the structure of party lists. For example, higher district magnitudes provide parties the opportunity to offer a more diverse slate of candidates (Ridley-Castle, 2023). Additionally, in closed list systems, parties control the position of candidates on the list, not voters. Consequently, parties can place women higher on lists or even use a **zipper system** to alternate candidate slots between male and female candidates (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-f).

# 8.4 Elections and Participation

Another method of assessing the performance of an election is by considering the **voter turnout rate**. Conventional wisdom suggests that high turnout in some countries is reflective of confidence in elections, while low turnout could be indicative of dissatisfaction. The reality is more nuanced (Kostelka & Blais, 2018).

## Turnout in Canada

In Canada, turnout is calculated by dividing the number of valid votes received by the number of registered electors (Elections Canada, 2025, April 28), and it has been on a gradual decline since the 1980s.




*"Graph: Voter Turnout at Federal Elections 1867-2021" by Elections Canada, Non-commercial Reproduction. Data in table form: Voter Turnout at Federal Elections*

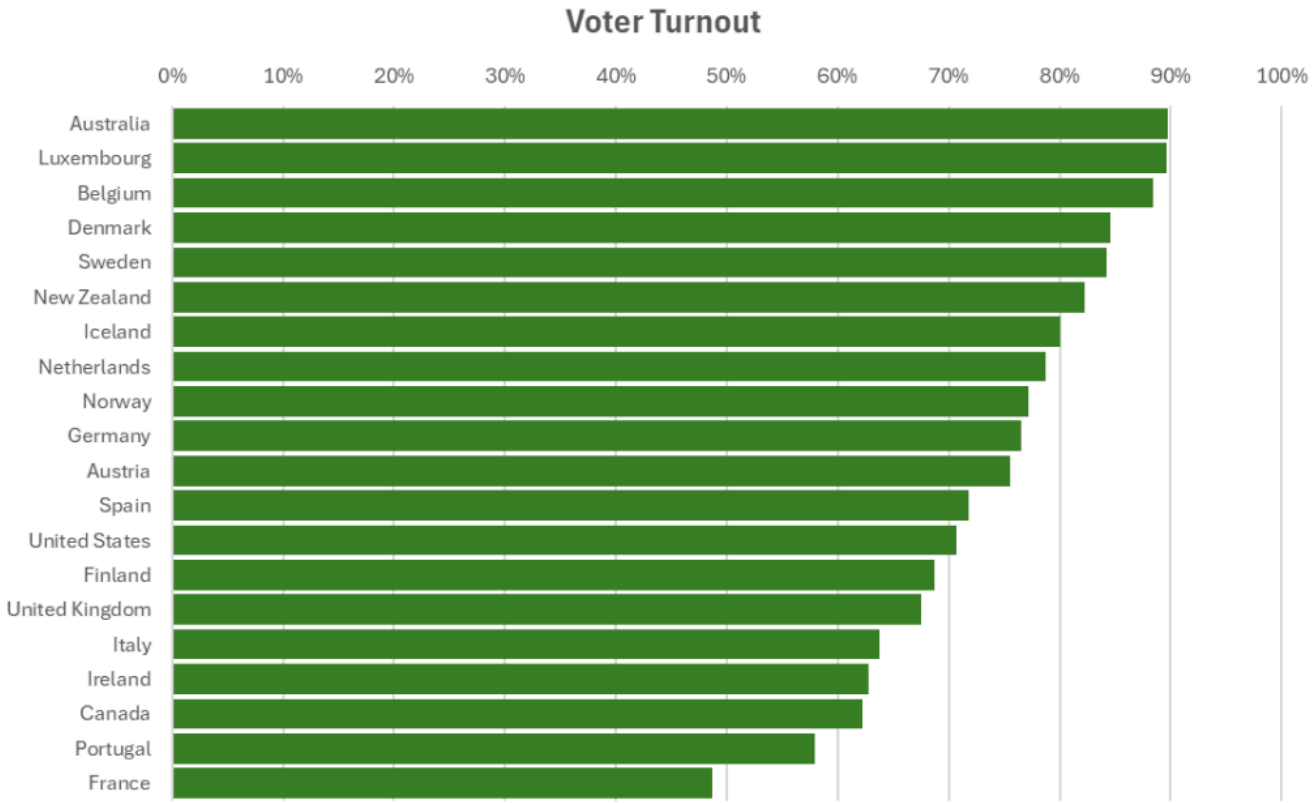
The decline in turnout is likely driven by multiple factors. Canadian voters are generally supportive of the FPTP system, but they have also expressed openness to the idea of electoral reform (Elections Canada, 2003).

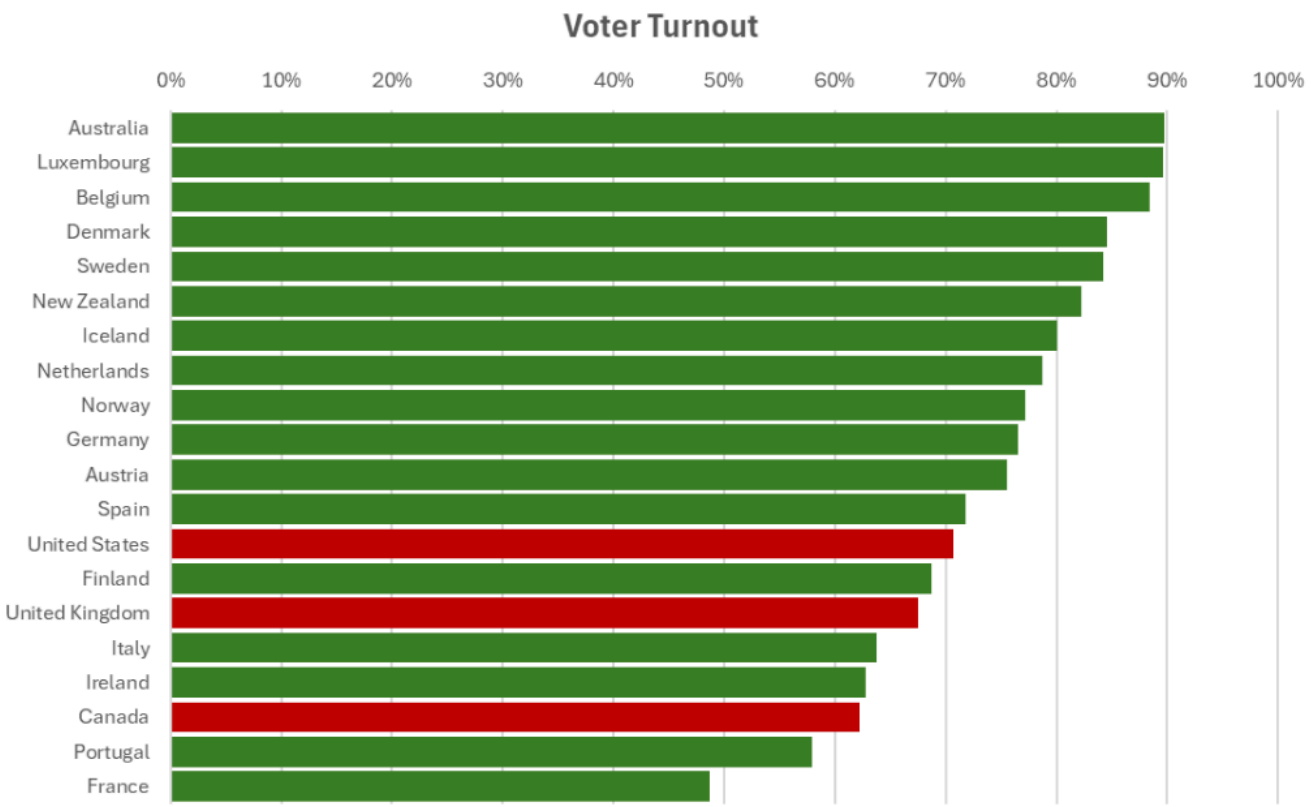
## Turnout & The Individual

A person's propensity to vote can often be a function of individual-level factors, such as income or level of education (Solijonov, 2016). Typically, people with higher levels of formal education are more likely to vote (Daoust & Nadeau, 2023), and younger voters are less likely to vote than older voters (Elections Canada, 2023). Voting can also be a social and cooperative exercise influenced by families, peers, and coworkers (Rolfe, 2012).

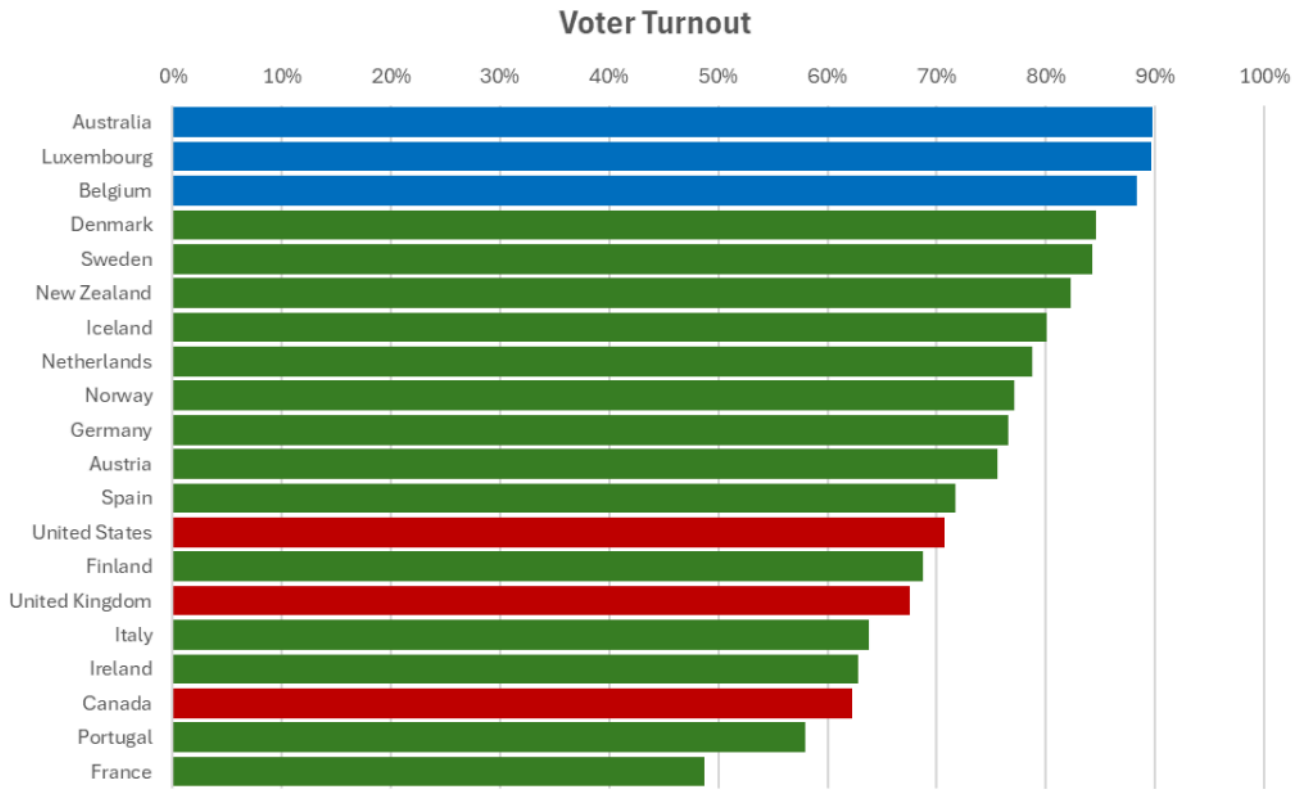
## Turnout & The System

It's also possible that turnout can be affected by mechanical factors related to the electoral system. The graphs below compare the turnout in 20 democracies. The countries in green use some type of proportional electoral system, while the countries in red use FPTP systems.






*Countries using SMP systems have lower voter turnout*




*Countries with the highest voter turnout enforce compulsory voting*

It would be tempting to conclude that PR can lead to higher turnout, yet the highest voter turnout is found in countries with compulsory voting, indicated in blue. Voter turnout can only tell us so much about the performance of elections.

# 8.5 Citizen Satisfaction

Comparing indicators like turnout and proportionality can be instructive, but elections are complex systems with dozens of unique features that are buttressed by country-specific election laws and legal systems. Cross-country comparisons may not tell us much. For example, in Australia, voter turnout is higher than in many other countries. That figure could be a product of a responsive government, an effective electoral system, or it could simply be the product of Australia's mandatory voting laws. Voter turnout may also be linked to citizen satisfaction with the electoral process.

## Did your team win?

What do people think about the performance of their electoral system? Naturally, people are more likely to be satisfied with an election outcome if they deem it a success for their preferred party. Conversely, voters who feel that their party lost the election are unlikely to feel as satisfied. This difference is known as the **winner-loser gap** (Daoust & Nadeau, 2023). This gap is larger in lower-quality regimes where the electoral process might not meet standards of fairness and transparency, yet it is smaller in democracies with higher-quality elections (Daoust & Nadeau, 2023). This suggests that winners and losers are more satisfied when they view the election to be effective.

## The Process or the People?

Political Scientists Andre Blais and Damien Bol (2023) suggest that proportional systems are viewed as being more effective than winner-take-all systems:

> *In a nutshell, although citizens are, on average, similarly satisfied under every electoral system, the rules organizing elections have consequences for the gap in satisfaction between winners and losers. On this criterion, PR systems seem to perform better due to their inclusiveness.*

### Depression and Dissatisfaction

Some evidence suggests that individual-level factors, such as experiencing depression, may produce negative evaluations of elections (Landwehr et al., 2025).

Lots of research on electoral performance focuses on the responsiveness and representativeness of the

electoral system; however, this is not to ignore other important features of electoral regimes, such as ballot design, accessibility, party competition, campaign finance laws, and redistricting procedures (Grofman & Lijphart, 1986). These are all important factors to consider.

## Comprehensive Comparison

To facilitate a more meaningful comparison, different indicators and features can be analyzed. The chart below displays results for 7 different democracies across 6 metrics.

***Average citizen satisfaction is a survey-based indicator from 0 (not at all satisfied) to 3 (fully satisfied)**
****After the 2019 and 2021 elections, Canada had consecutive single-party minority governments.**
***Source: Adapted from (Blais & Bol, 2023, pg 16 & 17).***

| Country | Turnout | System | ENPP | Type of Government | % of Women in Legislature | Average citizen satisfaction* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Australia | 92% | SMP | 3.2 | Single-party majority | 30% | 1.7 |
| Canada | 68% | SMP | 2.5 | Single-party majority** | 29% | 1.7 |
| France | 49% | Two-round Majority | 3.0 | Coalition majority | 40% | 1.5 |
| Germany | 76% | MMP | 5.6 | Coalition majority | 31% | 1.5 |
| Japan | 54% | MMP | 2.5 | Coalition majority | 10% | 1.6 |
| Sweden | 87% | PR | 5.6 | Coalition minority | 47% | 1.9 |
| USA | 67% | SMP | 2.0 | Single-party majority | 23% | 1.8 |

As you can see, countries can vary considerably across indicators. Some systems might produce more effective party representation, but they are lacking in other areas, such as the representation of women. There is no magic electoral formula for ensuring responsive and representative governments that satisfy all voters.

# 8.6 Chapter Summary

## Measuring Election Performance

After reviewing the material in this chapter, it might seem impossible to devise a truly meaningful measurement of electoral effectiveness. The Election Data Science Lab team at MIT attempted to do just that for American elections. The team compiled an index to compare and rank the performance of elections within each state. The Elections Performance Index combines twenty different measures of turnout, ease of registration, ballot processing, and wait times to give a comprehensive measure of election performance. Take a look through the index and consider the following questions:

- Which states scored the highest?
- Which states scored the lowest?
- What do you think of the criteria that was used?

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter,

- Elections aim to balance responsiveness, representativeness, and citizen satisfaction, but different systems produce different outcomes in these areas.
- Plurality and majority systems often lead to single-party governments that pass laws efficiently, while proportional systems create coalition governments that may be slower but more inclusive.
- Responsiveness is measured by how closely government policies align with public opinion; both proportional and plurality systems can be responsive, but in different ways.
- Representativeness includes proportionality (vote share vs. seat share) and descriptive representation (e.g. gender or demographic diversity); proportional systems usually perform better.
- Disproportional election results, such as those in Ontario's 2025 provincial election, show how plurality systems can distort voter preferences and reduce satisfaction.
- Proportional representation tends to increase the number of women elected, especially when combined with tools like gender quotas and zipper-style party lists.
- Voter turnout is influenced by both personal factors (like age and education) and systemic factors (like electoral design and compulsory voting laws); proportional systems often see higher turnout.
- Citizen satisfaction is higher when elections are perceived as fair and inclusive; proportional systems help narrow the satisfaction gap between winners and losers.

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OpenAI. (2025, June 24th). ChatGPT. [Large language model]. https://www.chatgpt.com Prompt: Can you please summarize the passage into 8 key points with no additional bullets. *Edited & Reviewed by author.*

## Key Terms

- **Descriptive Representation –** A form of representation where elected officials physically or demographically resemble the constituents they represent, such as in gender, race, age, or socioeconomic background.
- **District Magnitude –** The number of representatives elected from a single electoral district. Higher district magnitudes can allow for greater diversity among elected officials and often benefit smaller or underrepresented parties.
- **Effective Number of Parties in Parliament (ENPP) –** A statistical measure that reflects how many political parties effectively hold power in a legislature, accounting for both the number of parties and their relative sizes. A higher ENPP indicates a more fragmented or pluralistic parliament.
- **Proportionality –** A measure of how closely the percentage of votes a party receives aligns with the percentage of seats it gains in the legislature. A system is proportionate if vote share and seat share are nearly equal.
- **Representativeness –** The extent to which the elected government mirrors the makeup and preferences of the population. This includes political (partisan) alignment and demographic or social representation (e.g., gender, ethnicity).
- **Responsiveness –** The degree to which a government enacts laws and implements policies that align with the preferences of its citizens. A responsive government reflects public opinion in its decisions.
- **Voter Turnout Rate-** The proportion of eligible or registered voters who actually cast a vote in an election. It is commonly used as an indicator of public engagement, trust in the system, or satisfaction with the democratic process.
- **Winner-Loser Gap –** The difference in satisfaction with the electoral process between voters whose preferred party or candidate won versus those whose preferred option lost. A smaller gap is associated with higher perceived electoral fairness.
- **Zipper System –** A gender-balancing technique used in party lists under proportional representation systems, where male and female candidates are alternated (e.g., woman-man-woman-man) to ensure more equitable representation.

# CHAPTER 9: INTEGRITY & TRUST

## Chapter Overview




*Image by Parker Johnson, Unsplash License.*

# 9.0 Introduction

“Stop the steal!” After the extremely close 2020 American Presidential election, the losing Candidate, Donald Trump, maintained that the election was stolen from him. Not to be outdone, Brazilian presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro claimed to be the winning candidate after losing to Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Elsewhere, elections in Romania and Canada uncovered attempts by foreign governments to interfere in their domestic elections. How can people continue to have faith in elections, given accusations of fraud, theft, and malfeasance? In this chapter, we will examine how these events have impacted trust in elections worldwide, and we will look at different strategies countries are using to preserve the integrity of elections.

## Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Describe the different metrics for assessing the effectiveness of electoral institutions.
- Recall the various threats to election integrity and the respective countermeasures.
- Explain how election outcomes might shape perceptions of fairness and trust in elections.

## Things we need to know

In this chapter, you can expect to encounter the following terms/concepts.

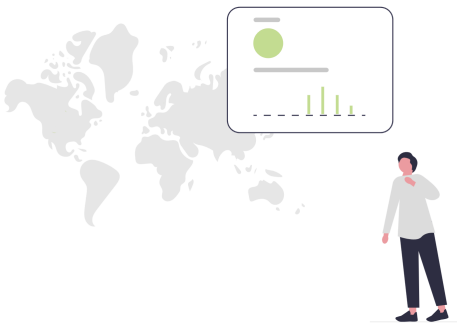
- Autocracy
- Democratization
- Voter Fraud
- Electoral Integrity

# 9.1 Free and Fair Elections

Elections are a cornerstone of democracy, but not all elections are conducted in a manner that is fair or transparent. Some leaders might try to manipulate the electoral process to stay in office. According to Daoust & Nadeau (2023), "every election represents both a test for democracy and a potential threat to its regime support" (pg 1), so holding open elections can pose an existential threat to an aspiring autocrat's power. When we encounter news reports about elections around the world, it can be difficult to discern whether an election was actually a fair contest. It may be helpful to examine different methods of assessing whether an election was truly democratic.

## Defining Democracies

The most basic way of identifying a democratic election is to look for evidence of voters casting ballots to elect leaders. This is a **procedural approach** to defining a democracy: if democratic procedures are present, such as elections, then the country must be a democracy. This approach might be overly simplistic, given the fact that some countries, such as Russia, conduct elections where candidate participation is limited and the outcome is predetermined.



To better identify democratic countries, a **substantive approach** to measuring democracy is more helpful. This involves examining the substance or quality of the electoral regime: are political parties legal? Do candidates face barriers to competing in the election? Can all citizens vote? Those are the types of questions to consider when assessing democratic elections.

## Ranking Democracies

Several think tanks, news agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGO) study elections around the world to derive a substantive ranking of democratic institutions. For instance, the V-Dem project conducts annual reporting on the state of democracy worldwide.

The project aims to categorize regimes based on 24 indicators that encompass the structure of government, legal regime, and electoral process. Countries can be grouped into several broad categories based on the nature of democratic participation.

**(Lührmann et al., 2018)**

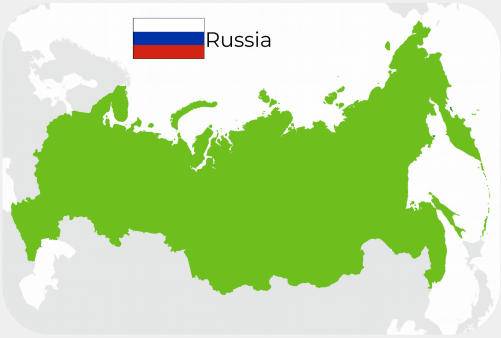
| Closed Autocracy | Electoral Autocracy | Electoral Democracy | Liberal Democracy |
|---|---|---|---|
| No elections. Party competition is prohibited, and citizens do not have democratic rights. | Elections are conducted, but the government may restrict the participation of parties and voters. The ruling party may win every time | Free and fair elections with multiparty competition and mass suffrage. | Electoral democracies with robust legal protections, constraints on government power, and equality before the law |

It should be noted that these categories are not exhaustive. There are multiple terms that can be used to categorize different types of regimes. For instance, the term **facade democracy** is sometimes used to describe

a regime that has the trappings of democracy, such as elections and party competition, but in reality it functions like a one-party authoritarian state.

### Close-up: Russia's Facade Democracy

- *V-Dem Regime Type:* Electoral **Autocracy**
- *Transparency International Corruption Rank:* 154\190
- *Economist Democracy Score & Category:* 2:03 /10 – Authoritarian
- *Freedom in the World Score*: 12/100




*"Kart Av Store norske leksikon" by Lille norske leksikon, CC BY-NC 4.0. Mods: Removed text, recoloured, added flag. "Flag of Russia" by Roman Poulvas, CC0.*

Russia is a good example of a facade democracy. It began to liberalize in the 1990s, adopting more liberal economic policies and allowing elections. The elections, however, were only symbolic. The Russian government, controlled by Vladimir Putin, used corruption, intimidation, and violence against political opponents to maintain its rule (Lynch, 2021). Additionally, the Russian regime prohibits competitive candidates from registering, and it ensures victory for Putin by manipulating the counting process (Freedom House, 2024).

## Fair Elections

Another organization that evaluates electoral fairness is the Electoral Integrity Project (EIP). The EIP evaluates electoral processes and institutions according to several criteria:

- **Contestation** – Can the candidates and parties compete on a level playing field?
- **Participation** – Is everyone able to vote?
- **Deliberation** – Are the choices meaningful? Do voters have access to unbiased information?
- **Adjudication** – Is the electoral process fair? Are the rules followed?

(Garnett et al. 2024).

Other indicators can be used to measure and compare democracies: **Satisfaction With Democracy (SWD)** is a survey-based measure used to gauge citizens' perceptions of the effectiveness of a country's democratic institutions (Daoust & Nadeau, 2023). The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) also publishes an annual Democracy Index to compare democratic processes across regimes. Norway and New Zealand topped the 2024 rankings, with each country earning a perfect score of 10.00 for electoral process and pluralism (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025). The NGO Freedom House compiles several measures of civil and political liberties into an annual Freedom in the World Index. Each method uses a

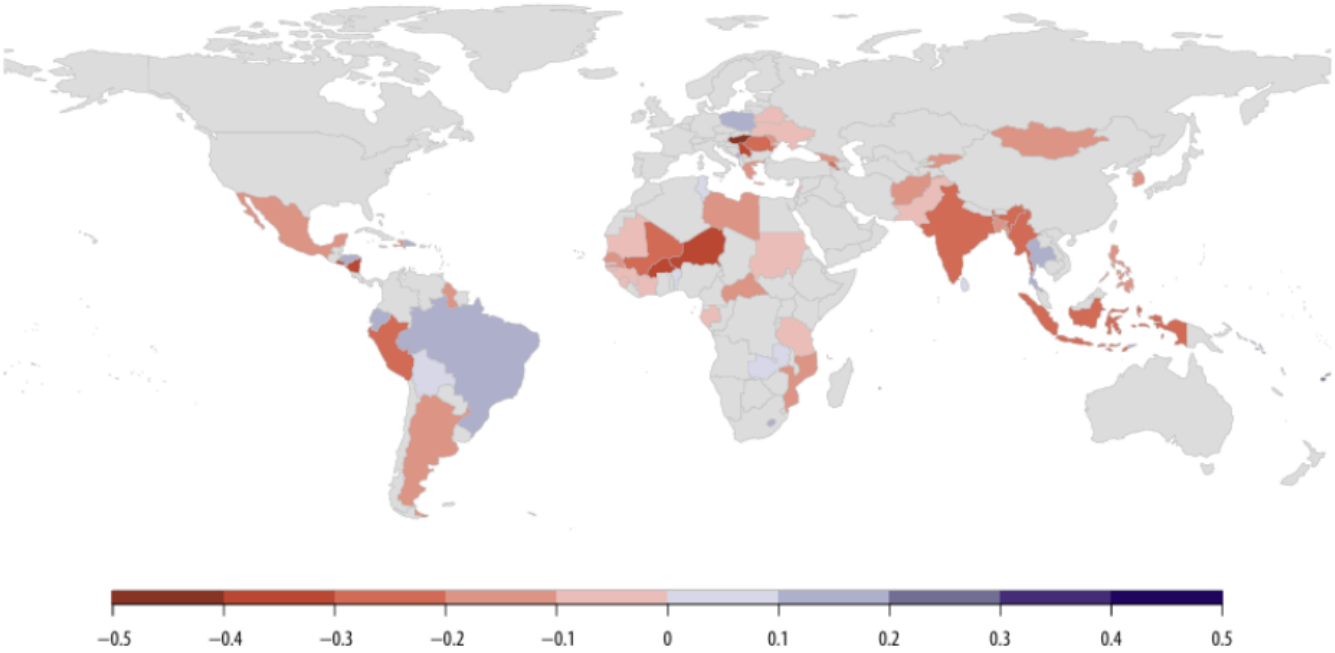
different set of measures to compare aspects of democracy, and the 2024 indicators seemed to show evidence of a decline.

## Democratic Backsliding?

2024 was a landmark year for elections around the world, with over 1.6 billion ballots being cast across 74 countries (International IDEA, 2025). Rather than being a cause for optimism, the year of the election seemed to signal a period of democratic backsliding where countries became less democratic (Harrison, 2025). This was evident in the Economist Intelligence Unit's rankings, which revealed an average score of 5.17 – the lowest average recorded since its inception in 2006 (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025).

Some researchers have tested the electoral backsliding hypothesis and did not find evidence of a general trend, but rather a divergence with some democracies strengthening and others weakening (Garnett & James, 2023). On the map below from V-Dem, the 19 countries in blue are strengthening their democratic institutions, called **democratizing**, and the 45 countries in red are becoming more autocratic, or **autocratizing**.

**Map of Countries Democratizing vs. Autocratizing**




*"Countries Democratizing vs. Autocratizing, Ongoing in 2024" by V-Dem Institute, FDEd(Can).*

Image Description
World map titled "Map of Countries Democratizing vs. Autocratizing," colour-coded to show the direction and degree of political regime changes. Countries are shaded along a gradient from dark red (strongly autocratizing, −0.5) to dark blue/purple (strongly democratizing, +0.5), with neutral changes shown in white (0).

Key observations:

- Countries like Venezuela, Turkey, India, and Myanmar are shown in shades of red, indicating autocratization.
- Countries like Ukraine, Chile, and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa are shaded in blue or purple, indicating

**democratization**.

- Many countries in Western Europe, North America, and parts of Africa and Asia are left in light gray, suggesting little to no change.

A colour bar at the bottom displays the scale from −0.5 (autocratizing) to +0.5 (democratizing).
The Electoral Integrity project observed similar results with some sub-Saharan African countries having peaceful transfer of power, while other countries saw their elections plagued with violence and irregularities (Garnett et al., 2025). This apparent erosion of democracy has highlighted the importance of electoral integrity.

# 9.2 Threats to Elections

To conduct an election, voters and election administrators need a safe and stable environment in which the election can happen. This can quickly be undone by threats, violence, and other forms of civil unrest. Elections can also be compromised by digital technologies, cyber attacks, and threats from foreign actors.

## Physical Threats

Electoral threats, conflict, and violence can be present in regimes without robust democratic institutions. One study attempted to document and categorize instances of election violence in over 600 elections around the world by considering the perpetrator, the victim, and the action (Birch & Muchlinski, 2017). The table below provides examples of the electoral violence that can be committed by the government, against the government, or by other non-state actors or foreign entities:

**Adapted from Birch & Muchlinski (2017), pg 6.**

| Threats | Attacks |
|---|---|
| • Government threatens violence against protestors<br>• Terrorist groups threaten to bomb polling stations<br>• One ethnic group threatens to attack another<br>• Foreign government threatens military action | • Police or military attack voters<br>• Police or military attack opposition parties<br>• Opposition forces attack police<br>• Groups attack election facilities and/or voting locations<br>• Government or paramilitary groups attack **election observers** |

Election violence has increased around the world, even in advanced democracies like the United States (Hanna, 2024). However, the potential for violence and corruption is more pronounced in emerging democracies that lack established democratic norms and institutions (International IDEA, 2025).

## Close up: Political Violence in Chad

- *V-Dem Regime Type:* Electoral Autocracy
- *Transparency International Corruption Rank:* 158\190
- *Economist Democracy Score and Category:* 1.98/10 – Authoritarian
- *Freedom in the World Score:* 15/100 Not Free

While Chad has been slowly trying to move beyond autocratic rule, elections are still plagued by state-initiated violence and intimidation. In May 2024, opposition presidential candidate Yaya Dillo was killed by Chadian security forces. Dillo was the leader of the Parti socialiste sans frontières (Human Rights Watch, 2024). A year later, in May 2025, former Prime Minister and leader of the Les Transformateurs party, Succès Masra, was arrested for allegedly inciting hatred (Human Rights Watch, 2024).


*"Tsjad og naboland Av Store norske leksikon" by Lille norske leksikon, CC BY-NC 4.0. Mods: Removed text, recoloured, added flag. "Flag of Chad" by Cloudcounter, CC0.*

## Virtual Threats

In addition to the physical threats to elections, threats posed by technology are also on the rise. Foreign interference, media manipulation, and disinformation can all undermine election administration. Digital threats have become more apparent in recent years. In one example, a Slovakian election was disrupted when an audio clip was released featuring a party leader discussing potential election fraud with a journalist (Meaker, 2023). The clip turned out to be a fake generated by artificial intelligence (AI), prompting some researchers to consider whether this was the first election outcome that may have been influenced by AI deepfakes (de Nadal & Jančárik, 2024).

## Foreign Interference

The threats posed by AI and digital technologies are especially problematic because of their global nature. Social media messages don't stop and report at the border. Consequently, election interference from foreign actors has been on the rise around the world.

### Defining Foreign Interference

Canada's Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions defines foreign interference as: "a clandestine, deceptive or threatening activity by a foreign state, or those acting on a state's behalf, that is detrimental to the interests of Canada." (Vol 2, pg 47)

In 2024, Romania postponed a Presidential election due to interference from a Russian disinformation campaign (Ross & Popoviciu, 2025). Russian actors have also used platforms such as Telegram and TikTok to influence elections in Moldova, Russia, and Germany (Popescu-Zamfir, 2025). According to one estimate, Russia (and previously the Soviet Union) has interfered in at least 10% of all global elections between 1945-2000 (Levin, 2020). Foreign interference in elections isn't new, but technology has changed the nature of the threat.

## Digital Borders

Intervening in election campaigns through social media channels often contravenes domestic laws that govern political advertising and foreign financing of election campaigns (Jones, 2023). In hopes of mitigating these threats, the European Commission has proposed a European Democracy Shield intended to protect elections in EU member states from **Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)** (Bentzen, 2025).

## Close-up: Foreign Interference in Canada

- *V-Dem Regime Type:* Electoral Democracy
- *Transparency International Corruption Rank*: 15/190
- *Economist Democracy Score & Category:* 8.69/10 – Full Democracy
- *Freedom in the World Score:* 97/100

In the 2019 Canadian Federal Election, people affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) organized buses to transport international students to a nomination meeting in the Electoral District of Don Valley North with the goal of influencing the outcome. This event, and similar allegations involving other ridings and other countries, including India, prompted a public inquiry to investigate the problem and recommend corrective action. The commission made over 50 recommendations, including suggested changes to relevant legislation and improving information sharing between intelligence agencies (Hogue, 2025, Vol 1).


*"Canada og naboland Av Store norske leksikon" by Lille norske leksikon, CC BY-NC 4.0. Mods: Removed text, recoloured, added flag. "The Flag of Canada" by Cloudcounter, CC0.*

# 9.3 Election Fraud

Even in stable and secure environments, elections can still be compromised by illegal or fraudulent tactics. Election fraud can happen in two primary categories: Voter Fraud and Election Fraud. First, **voter fraud** is a type of individual fraud in which individual voters or candidates might try to use illegal means to manipulate election results, such as casting multiple votes. The second type, election fraud, might be more accurately described as institutional fraud. This type of fraud involves illegal actions undertaken by the electoral administration. These measures might include interfering with the casting of votes, which would include stuffing ballot boxes with pre-filled ballots, or it could involve manipulating the counting of votes by destroying ballots or falsifying election results (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-d)

## Multiple Votes

To prevent individuals from casting multiple votes, sometimes called **plural voting**, most election administrators enforce practices of identity verification and voter identification.

### Verifying Identities

Most **Electoral Management Bodies (EMB**) require that voters prove their identity when voting or during registration.

### Identifying Voters Who Cast Votes

Once a vote has been cast, the voter must be removed from the voters' list or otherwise identified by marking a finger or thumb with ink.

(ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.-d).

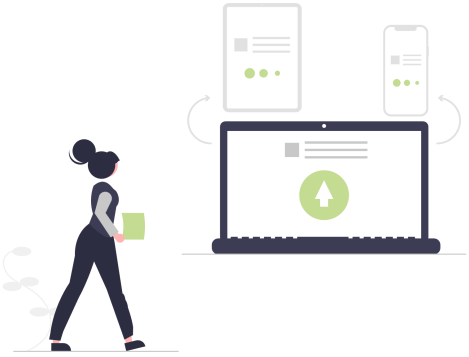
In the United States, allegations of voter fraud have proliferated in recent years, yet the practice remains incredibly rare. In theory, it is possible for a registered voter to submit a ballot in the electoral district where they are registered and then travel to another voting location in a different electoral district to register and cast a vote. In countries with well-established electoral management practices, the voter's name would be identified in post-election validation

### Penalties for Plural Voting

In the United States, several states treat multiple voting as a misdemeanour offence with a maximum fine of $10,000. In 30 others, voting twice is a felony (Ballotopedia, 2024). In Canada, someone found guilty of voting twice can face up to $50,000 in fines and 5 years in jail. Deterring plural voting and other types of fraud is essential to maintain trust in elections.

## Is Multiple Voting a Problem?

There is a veritable consensus among researchers that individual voter fraud is a nonexistent problem in America (Brennan Center for Justice, n.d). Additionally, with the electronic management and updating of voter rolls, administrators can identify and remedy instances of multiple voting within six seconds of the vote being cast (Sullivan & Ax, 2020). One study identified a mere 31 voters casting multiple votes in American elections between 2000 and 2014 (Sullivan & Ax, 2020). Similarly, in Canada, only four voters were found to have cast multiple votes in the 2015 election (Watters, 2019). The problem is much greater in electoral autocracies such as Russia, where ballot stuffing is a common occurrence (Radio Free Europe, 2024).



### The Birthday Problem

Even when multiple voting is detected, some of the cases are incorrectly identified as false positives (Goel et al., 2020). This is due to the '**birthday problem**' of voters in different locations having the same birthday and similar names (McDonald & Levitt, 2008). The verification process will flag the similarity despite the records belonging to different voters.

# 9.4 Electoral Integrity and Trust

The concept of **electoral integrity** refers to a general collection of practices and policies to combat election fraud and malfeasance. The Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security (2012) defines electoral integrity as:

> *Any election that is based on the democratic principles of **universal suffrage** and political equality as reflected in international standards and agreements, and is professional, impartial, and transparent in its preparation and administration throughout the electoral cycle. (pg 6)*

Efforts to promote electoral integrity can include administrative procedures and oversight that ensure fairness and accuracy in the electoral process, but they can also include measures to prevent interference from malicious actors.

## Election Monitors

To help preserve the fairness and integrity of the electoral process, **international election observers** may be assigned to monitor the election. Typically, observer missions watch ballots being cast and counted at polling stations (The Electoral Integrity Project, 2023). The presence of international observers can have a deterrent effect, reducing the potential for violence and election fraud (Asunka et al., 2019; Leeffers & Vicente, 2019), although committed bad actors can redirect their efforts or simply expel the observers.


*Image by European Union External Action, EU Reuse Policy.*

## Regulatory Measures

Elections Canada has policies in place for ensuring electoral integrity, including measures to deter fraud and uncover instances of multiple voting.

**Before the Vote**: The National Register of Electors is updated using more than 40 sources of information to ensure that only individuals who are entitled to vote are on the lists of electors.

**During the Vote:**

- Electors must prove their identity and address before being allowed to vote.
- Electors are struck from the list of electors once they have voted.
- The vote is secret to protect individuals from being forced to vote a certain way.
- Voting and counting can be observed.

**After the Vote:** Post-election verification are done to make sure that any irregularities not spotted during the vote are found and looked into.

There is a general consensus that successful efforts to increase election integrity include regulating political finance, strengthening Electoral Management Bodies (EMB), and fostering an open media environment (Resimić & Bergin, 2024). By strengthening the integrity of the process, election officials can hopefully maintain public trust in elections.

## Trust In Elections

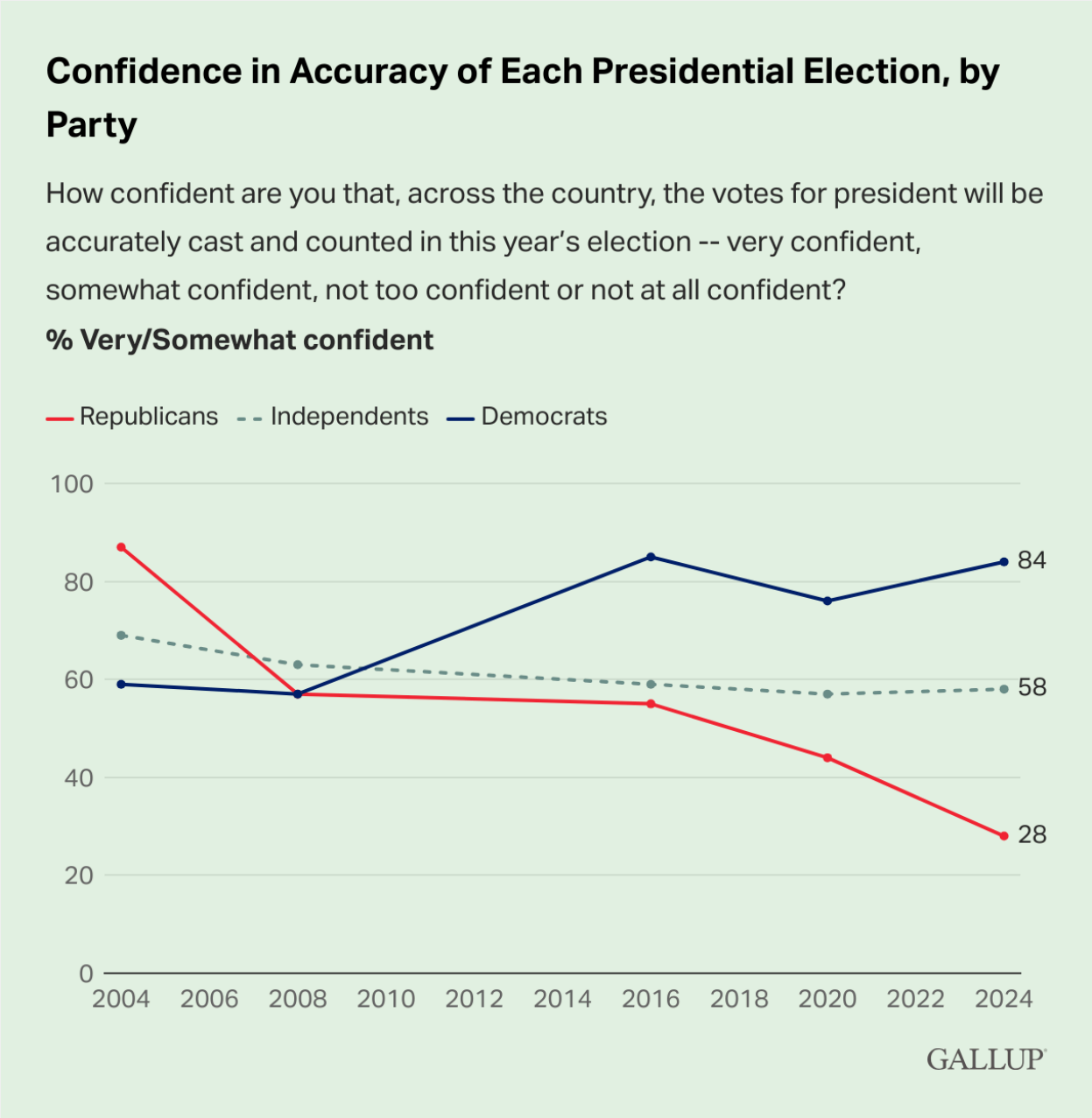
Elections are an act of trust. We trust election officials to register us and keep that information secure. We trust that voting locations, with sufficient quantities of ballots, will open when and where they are scheduled. We also expect that votes will be tallied and reported accurately. Without adequate levels of trust, it is difficult to maintain the social cohesion, economic cooperation, and effective governance necessary to maintain political stability (Norris, 2022).

## Sources of Mistrust

Generally, trust in elections can be a product of institutional performance, effectiveness and transparency, but it can also depend on individual-level factors (Kerr et al., 204). At the individual level, feelings of mistrust can be cultivated by media diets and messages from politicians, but they can also be influenced by election results, with voters feeling more negative when their party loses and more positive when their preferred party wins (Daoust & Nadeau, 2023).

## Trump and Trust

After losing the 2020 Presidential Election, US President Donald Trump propagated claims of voter fraud and other irregularities with the electoral process. The messaging led to a partisan gap in trust, with Republicans being far less likely than Democrats to trust the electoral process.




*"Confidence in Accuracy of Each Presidential Election, by Party" by Lydia Saad, Gallup, FDEd (CAN).*

Image Description
Line graph titled "Confidence in Accuracy of Each Presidential Election, by Party," showing the percentage of Republicans (red), Independents (dashed grey), and Democrats (blue) who reported being "very/somewhat confident" that presidential votes will be accurately cast and counted, from 2004 to 2024.

- Republicans: Confidence declined sharply from 85% in 2004 to 28% in 2024.

- Democrats: Confidence increased from 59% in 2004 to 84% in 2024, with the highest level (over 80%) seen around 2016.
- Independents: Confidence remained relatively stable, ranging from about 60% in 2004 to 58% in 2024.

The chart highlights a growing partisan divide in confidence over election integrity.

After winning the 2024 election, Republican trust rebounded with 82% of Republican respondents trusting that results were counted accurately (Kousser et al., 2024). The partisan differences in trust were likely a function of Republican partisans reacting to election results and responding to elite cues.

## Trust and Corruption

The presence of corruption can also erode trust. Transparency International tracks levels of trust around the world using its **Corruption Perceptions Index** (CPI). Countries at the top of the rankings, such as Denmark and Finland, are characterized by legal systems that prevent public sector corruption, independent institutions, and fair elections. Countries at the bottom of the list, such as Somalia and Venezuela, are typically repressive authoritarian regimes. It's not uncommon for levels of trust to fluctuate from one year to the next, which underscores the fragile nature of trust in elections.

# 9.5 Chapter Summary

## Real Life Example: Close-up: Democratic Decline in America?

- **V-Dem Regime Type**: Liberal Democracy
- **Transparency International Corruption Rank**: 28\180
- **Economist Democracy Score & Category**: 7.85/10 – Flawed Democracy
- **Freedom in the World Score**: 84/100

In the 2024 Democracy Index from the Economist Intelligence Unit, the United States was downgraded from a Full Democracy to a Flawed Democracy. There are several factors that could be contributing to this decline. For one, the V-Dem project has documented instances of political violence and threats against election workers (Klarhoefer, 2024). Second, since taking office for a second time, President Trump has wielded executive power to bar specific journalists from press availabilities; to stop enforcing the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA), which prevents American companies from paying bribes; and to deport individuals without due process (Global State of Democracy Initiative, n.d.).


*"USA of naboland Av norske leksikon" by Lille norske leksikon, CC BY-NC 4.0. Mods: Removed text, recoloured, added flag. "The Flag of the United States of America" by Dbenbenn, Zscout370, Jacobolus, Indolences, and Technion, Public Domain.*

### What do you think?

- Does this justify categorizing the US as a flawed democracy?
- How would you categorize the American political system?

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter,

- The chapter examines global threats to election integrity, including high-profile fraud allegations and foreign interference, and their impact on public trust in democratic systems.
- It differentiates between procedural and substantive definitions of democracy, highlighting the need for free competition, legal participation, and voting rights beyond simply holding elections.
- Tools like V-Dem, Freedom House, and the Electoral Integrity Project assess the quality of democracies, with examples such as Russia illustrating "facade democracies" where elections exist but lack fairness.
- In 2024, despite record voter turnout across 74 countries, data showed a global decline in democracy quality, with increasing autocratization and only a few nations strengthening democratic institutions.
- Elections are increasingly threatened by both physical violence—especially in emerging democracies like Chad—and digital threats, including AI-generated deepfakes and social media manipulation.
- Foreign interference is growing, with documented cases in Canada, Romania, and elsewhere, prompting inquiries and initiatives like the European Democracy Shield to counteract external manipulation.
- Election fraud is categorized into voter fraud (e.g., multiple voting) and institutional fraud (e.g., ballot tampering), though in stable democracies like the U.S. and Canada, such cases are rare and often overstated.
- Trust in elections depends on both institutional transparency and individual factors such as media influence and partisan bias, and is further shaped by anti-corruption measures, observer missions, and electoral integrity safeguards.

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OpenAI. (2025, June 30th). ChatGPT. [Large language model]. https://www.chatgpt.com Prompt: Can you please summarize the passage into 8 key points with no additional bullets. *Edited & Reviewed by author.*

## Key Terms

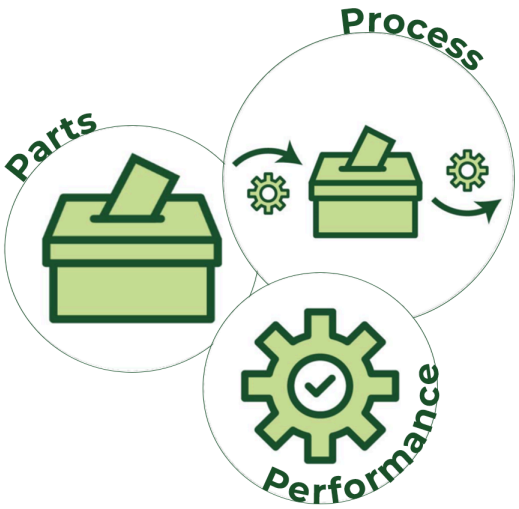
- **Adjudication** –The process of fairly resolving disputes and enforcing rules during elections, ensuring procedural fairness and legal compliance.
- **Autocracy** – A system of government in which supreme power is concentrated in the hands of one person, often with limited political freedoms or checks on authority.
- **Autocratizing** – A term for countries becoming more autocratic, where democratic practices and freedoms are being eroded or dismantled.
- **Birthday Problem** – A statistical phenomenon where people with similar names and birthdates may be mistakenly flagged as the same individual, leading to false positives in fraud detection systems.
- **Contestation** –A measure of whether elections allow meaningful competition between candidates or political parties.
- **Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)** – A global ranking by Transparency International that scores countries based on perceived levels of public sector corruption.
- **Deliberation** – The quality of public debate and information available to voters, including whether choices are meaningful and based on unbiased facts.
- **Democratization** – The transition process through which a country adopts democratic systems of governance, including free and fair elections, rule of law, and civil liberties.
- **Democratizing** –A term used to describe countries that are becoming more democratic through institutional reforms and increased political freedoms.
- **Election Observers** – Independent individuals or groups—often international—who monitor elections to ensure they are conducted freely and fairly.
- **Electoral Integrity** – The adherence to democratic principles in the conduct of elections, ensuring they are free, fair, transparent, and conducted without fraud or manipulation.
- **Electoral Management Bodies (EMB)** –Official organizations or agencies responsible for administering elections, including registering voters, overseeing voting, and counting ballots.
- **Facade Democracy** –A regime that appears to follow democratic procedures, such as holding elections, but lacks genuine democratic substance due to corruption, repression, or manipulation.
- **International Election Observers** are independent individuals or organizations from outside a country who monitor electoral processes to assess their fairness, transparency, and adherence to international democratic standards.
- **Plural Voting** – The illegal act of casting more than one vote in the same election, often by exploiting weaknesses in the voter registration system.
- **Procedural Approach** to defining a democracy- if democratic procedures are present, such as elections, then the country must be a democracy.
- **Satisfaction With Democracy (SWD)** – A survey-based metric that assesses how satisfied citizens are with the way democracy functions in their country.
- **Substantive Approach** to defining democracy is based on the realization of core principles rather than on the presence of formal procedures like elections.
- **Universal Suffrage** – The right of almost all adult citizens to vote, regardless of race, gender, income, or social status.

- **Voter Fraud –** Illegal actions by individual voters or candidates aimed at influencing the outcome of an election, such as voting more than once or impersonating another voter.

# CONCLUSION

Elections are everywhere. In 2025, 150,000 members of the liberal party of Canada voted to select a new leader who would automatically become Prime Minister. A month later, thousands of nurses in Alberta voted online to ratify their collective agreement. Soon after, a little over 10 million baseball fans cast votes to select the starting lineup for Major League Baseball's All-Star Game. Voting is a default mode for making political decisions, both big and small. In the preceding nine chapters, we have examined the parts, process, and performance of electoral administration. Hopefully, this resource has provided some insight and information to help understand how elections work.

## Parts, Process, and Performance




We began this exploration by examining the districts, ballots, franchise and formula – the fundamental building blocks of an election. From the simple ballots of Canada's Single Member Plurality (SMP) system to the elaborate ranked choice ballots used in Western Australia's preferential voting system, we reviewed a variety of ballot configurations. These ballots serve as the user interface of an election, allowing the public to input their choice so the electoral system can translate those preferences into a representative government.

Next, we looked at the vital functions performed by poll clerks, returning officers, and other election workers who prepare ballots, staff voting locations, and tabulate results. This is the thankless, underpaid, and almost invisible work that ensures the successful execution of an election. These functions are overseen by Electoral Management Bodies (EMB), which coordinate thousands of election workers to compile totals, conduct recounts, and communicate results to the public.

Election administrators must also work to protect the integrity of elections. In the final section, we reviewed the physical and digital threats that can compromise election security. Protecting against threats – both foreign and domestic – is vital for preserving public trust in elections, and that trust appears to be in decline around the world.

## Simplicity and Complexity

Another noteworthy election took place in 2025 when the Catholic Church set out to select a replacement for the deceased pontiff, Pope Francis. Perhaps no election better exemplifies how electoral components work together than the papal conclaves held to elect a new pope.

## Electing a New Pope

*"Cónclave papal en la Capilla Sixtina", Public Domain*

When a vacancy occurs, senior Cardinals from around the world (the voters) are summoned to the Vatican (the voting location) to begin the process.

Upon arriving, the Cardinals surrender phones and computers, they forgo newspapers and television, and they sever all contact with the outside world. These extreme security measures are intended to preserve secrecy (electoral integrity) and prevent any external actors from influencing the proceedings (foreign interference).

After enumerating the candidates, attendees write their choice on a piece of paper (write-in ballot). After all ballots are cast, each one is opened and read aloud (tabulation) to see if any candidate received a majority of the votes. If no candidate meets the threshold, additional rounds of voting are held (majority run-off) until one candidate receives over 50% of the votes.

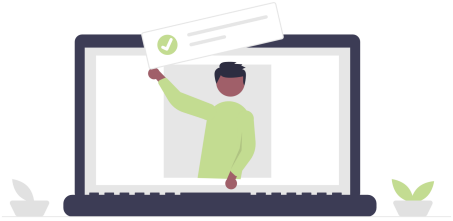
To signal the selection of the new pope (communication of results), white smoke is released from the chimney at the Sistine Chapel.

Although the election of a pope by just 130 voters may appear trivial, it demonstrates the same underlying components found in elections everywhere. Granted, administration becomes more difficult as scale and complexity increase, but all elections combine the same basic elements: voters, districts, ballots, and an electoral formula. The parts are combined into a systematic process to solicit preferences, tabulate them, and communicate results, all within some defined electoral jurisdiction. Parts. Process. Performance.

## What does the future hold?

Elections are never the same. From one election to the next, the voting population is different, with new voters reaching the minimum voting age and older voters aging out of the electorate (or dying). The economic conditions are variable, technology is advancing, and the norms that govern behaviour are always changing. The contexts in which elections are held can range from privation and scarcity to relative affluence and abundance. Future elections are bound to look different than their contemporary counterparts.

## Elections in the Digital Age



New technologies are becoming increasingly important in election administration. New tools and applications can help balance accessibility, usability, and security. For example, biometric identification markers such as fingerprints, iris scans, and facial recognition technology are all potential tools to guard against voter fraud in the voting and registration process; online and internet voting continues to grow in Europe as a means of reaching voters who may face barriers to voting; and the explosion of AI applications poses the ultimate threat to election integrity. The technologies will change, but the core functions remain: ensuring ballot access, protecting election integrity, and guarding against threats. Election administration will only grow in importance in the years to come.

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# Version History

This page provides a record of changes made to the open textbook since its initial publication. If the change is minor, the version number increases by 0.1. If the change involves substantial updates, the version number increases to the next full number.

| Version | Date | Change | Affected Web Rage |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1.0 | July 23, 2025 | Publication | N/A |