The potential and consequences of municipal electoral reform

Aaron A. Moore
About IMFG

The Institute on Municipal Finance and Governance (IMFG) is an academic research hub and non-partisan think tank based in the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto.

IMFG focuses on the fiscal health and governance challenges facing large cities and city-regions. Its objective is to spark and inform public debate, and to engage the academic and policy communities around important issues of municipal finance and governance.

The Institute conducts original research on issues facing cities in Canada and around the world; promotes high-level discussion among Canada’s government, academic, corporate, and community leaders through conferences and roundtables; and supports graduate and post-graduate students to build Canada’s cadre of municipal finance and governance experts. It is the only institute in North America that focuses solely on municipal finance and governance issues in large cities and city-regions.

IMFG is funded by the Province of Ontario, the City of Toronto, Avana Capital Corporation, Maytree, and TD Bank Group.

Author

Aaron Moore is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Winnipeg, an Adjunct Professor in the Department of City Planning at the University of Manitoba, and a Fellow at the Institute on Municipal Finance and Governance. Aaron has published a book on the politics of urban development in Toronto, and articles and book chapters on urban planning, municipal governance, municipal elections, urban public policy, and public-private partnerships.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Enid Slack, Selena Zhang, and Philippa Campsie for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
Executive Summary

Following pressure from some sectors of civil society, the Province of Ontario passed a law in 2016 allowing municipalities to use ranked ballots to elect mayors and councillors. This change in provincial regulation, and the dialogue and debate that led to the policy change, raise important questions about the nature of municipal electoral systems in Canada.

Changing an electoral system can improve voter turnout and alter electoral outcomes for the better. However, no change to an existing electoral system will address all the perceived flaws within an existing system. Change may, in fact, introduce new and unintended complications to elections and voting.

Understanding the nature of different electoral systems is a necessary step when contemplating change or the status quo, as is being able to articulate clearly the objectives one hopes to achieve through electoral reform. Ultimately, proponents of change must understand that the objectives they hope to achieve through electoral reform may not be universal, and that different objectives may actually conflict with one another.

This paper is intended to introduce and discuss the variety of components that constitute a municipal electoral system so that proponents for change, supporters of the status quo, and individuals simply wishing to expand their knowledge of democratic institutions may be better informed about the potential and consequences of electoral reform at the municipal level.
The potential and consequences of municipal electoral reform

Introduction

In June 2016, the Province of Ontario granted municipalities the authority to use ranked ballots in their elections. In doing so, the Province was responding to a grassroots movement to reform voting at the local level. Organizations such as the Ranked Ballot Initiative of Toronto (RaBIT) argued that ranked ballots would prevent mayoral and council candidates from winning elections with less than a majority of the vote, eliminate vote splitting, and reduce strategic voting at the municipal level.

Proponents of the change hoped to address issues such as low voter turnout and a sense among voters that their vote would not count if they did not support the winning candidate. The underlying issue behind the movement was the sense that current electoral systems in municipalities cannot translate residents’ preferences into an elected body that accurately represents their interests.

An electoral system can help shape municipal governance. To be effective and encourage good governance, a system for electing municipal representatives must balance many, often competing, objectives (see Box 1) and ultimately generate a municipal council that can accurately translate constituents’ interests into actionable policies.

Despite the often simplistic discussion surrounding changes to electoral systems, they are complex processes with many elements, all of which can play a role in enhancing or diminishing good governance. Such complexity requires a broader understanding of the many elements of electoral systems and how the structure of electoral systems shapes electoral outcomes.

This paper describes and explains the constituent parts of electoral systems and their most common varieties to foster greater understanding and dialogue among the public and policy-makers. It draws on the growing body of literature on municipal electoral systems in the United States, Canada, and Britain. The purpose of this paper is not to argue for any specific electoral system, but to identify the benefits and flaws of the variety of components that make up the system.
The first section of the paper describes the components of a municipal electoral system. The second discusses the purported benefits and deficiencies of different varieties of components. The third discusses the various configurations of these components in an electoral system and how different combinations of components can complement or detract from each other. The final section concludes the discussion by outlining the factors that residents should understand when considering institutional change.

The Structure of Electoral Systems

No discussion of electoral systems can account for all variations and permutations of their institutional structure. As best as possible, however, this paper introduces the most common variations of the constituent parts of elections in Canadian municipalities, and some variations that, while not necessarily implemented in any municipality, have been the subject of much discussion, such as ranked ballots.

Box 1: Electoral Objectives

Advocates for ranked ballots in municipal elections argue that changing how votes are allocated to candidates will strengthen democracy at the local level. But is ensuring that a councillor or mayor is elected with a majority of the vote the only goal of an election? If not, should it be the primary objective, or are other objectives more important than obtaining a majority?

To evaluate the strengths of different electoral systems, one must assess their ability to address different, and sometimes competing, objectives. Any attempt to identify every permutation of objectives for an electoral system is bound to fail. However, the following five categories capture many of the key factors one must consider when considering the effectiveness of an electoral system.

Local Democracy

The ideal of local democracy is a system in which community interests are represented and reflected in the policies of local government. In practice, this means, among other things, that residents have easy access to their elected officials, and that elected officials will react to the specific interests of their constituents. In this sense, local government is the antithesis of national government and sub-national governments (such as provincial governments).

Representation

It is important to distinguish between local democracy, which largely focuses on the representation of small geographically defined communities, and the broader notion of representation used in today’s discourse on democracy. Representation refers to the objective of achieving equal or adequate representation of societal groups that have traditionally gone unrepresented, such as ethnic minorities and women.

Engagement

In Canada, with the exception of the occasional referendum, elections are the primary means citizens have to indicate their support for or opposition to government and government policies. As a result, low voter engagement skews government perception of citizens’ policy preferences, resulting in suboptimal policy decisions. While the translation of residents’ preferences into policy is never perfect, clearly the greater the engagement of the electorate, the better that government can respond to citizens’ interests.

Intelligibility

The intelligibility of an electoral system refers to the relative ease with which voters can access information on candidates and navigate the system when voting. In theory, the simpler an electoral system, the fewer factors a voter must consider when deciding how to vote. The greater the number of options available to the voter, the more information the voter needs to distinguish between the options. Where information is plentiful, a greater number of options may not be an issue. However, where information is scarce, it is harder for a voter to make an informed decision, and less likely that the voter will bother to vote.

Accountability

The goal of accountability focuses on ensuring that voters can use the electoral system to hold elected officials accountable for their decisions. To achieve this goal, the electoral system, along with the structure of municipal government, must allow voters to correctly connect elected officials to policy decisions. While this may seem an easy task, it can prove difficult if not impossible, depending on the nature of the electoral system.
The four broad electoral components this paper addresses are council size; district magnitude; electoral formula; and political parties. 

**Council size** refers to the debate over the ideal size of a municipal council. The terms **district magnitude** and **electoral formula** address recurring debates about the structure of municipal elections and government. The discussion of **political parties** refers to the debate over whether or not they should be permitted in municipal elections.

This list of the components of an electoral system is not exhaustive; however, these four elements and the variants addressed below are the most important factors in shaping an electoral system. How they are constituted within an electoral system can have a profound effect on the nature and outcome of elections, and how elected officials govern.

**Council Size**

Council size refers to the number of individuals elected to municipal council. In large Canadian cities, the size of council can vary considerably. For instance, Montréal’s City Council has 64 councillors and one mayor, while Edmonton’s has 14 councillors and one mayor. Though often overlooked in discourse on municipal government and municipal elections, council size matters, particularly in municipalities with large populations, because the number of councillors (or aldermen and women) elected to council dictates constituency size (the number of residents per councillor), which can influence residents’ ability to access their elected representative and possibly the policy positions of candidates elected to council.

**District Magnitude: Ward vs. At-large**

District magnitude refers to the geography of the constituency that elects council members and the mayor. In Canada, mayors are almost always elected via at-large elections. At-large elections are the one extreme of district magnitude in that the entire municipality is the constituency.

While most mayors are elected at large, most councillors are elected through wards (also known as single-member districts), a geographic subdivision of the municipality. For instance, the City of Calgary is divided into 14 such wards or districts. Candidates for council run in individual wards, and only voters living in the ward are allowed to vote for that ward’s councillor. Each ward elects one councillor to city council. In such a system, the councillors’ constituencies are confined to the ward they represent.

Many variations of district magnitude are used in Canada, including combinations of different systems. For instance, many small municipalities, and a few large ones, like the City of North Bay, Oshawa, and the City of Montréal, elect all councillors at large. In contrast, the City of Edmonton elects 20 councillors by ward and five at large. However, most municipalities employ either single-member wards or elect all councillor members at large. For simplicity’s sake, this paper compares and contrasts these two extremes – at-large elections and single-member ward elections.

Whether a municipality employs a ward or at-large election to choose its council can affect the type of candidates elected to council, and the relative voice of different constituencies within a municipality. As a result, constituents who feel left out or marginalized in municipal politics often argue for or against one of the two electoral structures.

**Electoral Formula: First-Past-the-Post vs. Ranked Ballots**

Electoral formula refers to the manner by which votes are tallied and allotted to candidates in an election. The formula for allotting votes is often at the root of debates over electoral systems at higher levels of government and in other countries – consider, for instance, the debate over how Canadian MPs should be elected federally or the debate over the Electoral College in the United States.

When political parties are present in an electoral system, the variety of possible electoral formulae is seemingly endless. However, in systems with no political parties, such as the majority of municipal electoral systems in Canada, options are more constrained. For that reason, this paper focuses on the most common system in Canada – first-past-the-post – and the most commonly proposed alternative – ranked ballot.

In a first-past-the-post system (FPTP), voters choose one candidate for an elected position. Following the election, votes are tallied for all candidates. The candidate with a plurality of votes is then elected as the winner. While technically referring to plurality voting in ward or single-member district elections, I use the term first-past-the-post to refer to all types of plurality voting. In Canada, notably in at-large municipal elections, candidates can still win based on a plurality, despite being elected at large. In most at-large systems in Canada, candidates win elections by being among the top vote-getters. The cut-off for being elected will depend on the number of available seats. So, for instance, in a city of 100,000 residents, a candidate needs to receive at least 10,000 votes to be elected.
The potential and consequences of municipal electoral reform

with an at-large system and eight available council seats, the eight candidates with the most votes will be elected.

In the absence of political parties, the alternatives to FPTP systems are limited, but at least two other systems can be employed to allocate votes: ranked ballot and run-off. Both formulae are considered *majority* systems. As with plurality systems, many voters will inevitably cast their vote for a losing candidate. However, ranked-ballot and run-off formulae focus on ensuring that the winning candidate will at least represent a majority of voters. Despite its greater simplicity, run-off elections are typically not the preferred alternative to FPTP, because they usually require voters to cast votes in a second run-off election following the general election before a candidate can be declared the winner. In contrast, the ranked ballot requires only one election.

The ranked-ballot system for allocating votes goes by a number of names, including single transferable vote (STV – a term often used in partisan settings), ranked choice voting (RCV), and instant runoff voting (IRV). All these formulae operate in a similar manner. Voters rank candidates according to their preferences; in most cases, voters can rank up to three candidates. Following the vote, voters’ first preferences are tallied. Typically, candidates that are not among the top two (or three) vote-getters will be dropped. Their ballots will then be reallocated to other candidates based on voters’ ranking of the remaining candidates. So, if a voter’s first preference does not make the first cut of candidates, that vote will be allocated to the voter’s next preference. Through this process of reallocation, one candidate should eventually win a majority of the vote.

How votes are allocated to candidates can influence who is elected (see Table 1 for an example). Different formulae for allocating votes may favour certain candidates (or parties where present) over others. This fact is largely responsible for the controversy surrounding the use of FPTP and arguments for its replacement. Proponents for change believe a different electoral formula, such as ranked ballot, will result in a more just outcome and/or an elected body that better reflects the interests of its constituents.

**Political Parties**

While ubiquitous at the federal and provincial level, political parties at the municipal level are rare in Canada, confined mainly to a few cities in lower-mainland British Columbia – most notably Vancouver – and several cities in Québec, including Montréal and Québec City (few of these parties have any direct ties to provincial or federal ones). The fact that B.C. and Québec have municipal political parties while other provinces lack them is no coincidence, as B.C. and

| Table 1: Comparing the Outcome of a Mayoral Election under First-Past-the-Post and Ranked Ballot |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| **FPTP Mayoral Election**          |                                 |
| Percentage of votes for each candidate | Winner under FPTP |
| Candidate 1                         | 40%                            | Candidate 1 |
| Candidate 2                         | 30%                            |
| Candidate 3                         | 10%                            |
| Candidate 4                         | 10%                            |
| Candidate 5                         | 10%                            |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Ranked Ballot Mayoral Election</strong></th>
<th><strong>Candidates who made the cut-off</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of first-choice votes for each candidate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate 1</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate 2</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate 3</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate 4</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate 5</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Percentage of votes for top two candidates after reallocation</strong></th>
<th><strong>Winner under ranked ballot</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Candidate 1</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate 2</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Explanation:** This scenario compares a mayoral election under FPTP to an election using ranked ballots. Under FPTP, Candidate 1 wins with a plurality of the vote. With a ranked ballot, however, Candidate 1 does not have enough votes (a majority) to win outright in the first round. Therefore, the three candidates with the least votes are dropped, and their votes are reallocated based on the secondary (or tertiary) preference of voters. In this example, the majority of reallocated votes ranked Candidate 2 over Candidate 1, thus Candidate 2 is able to win with a majority.
Québec are the only provinces in Canada with legislation enabling political parties at the municipal level. The enabling legislation allows political parties to collect donations for the party and its candidates and allows the party to be identified on the ballot. The ability of a party to raise party funds reduces the need for individual candidates to raise their own funds to campaign, and allows for the centralization of campaign strategy.

Municipal parties are not banned in any of the eight provinces that lack such legislation; however, in the absence of such enabling legislation, the benefits of establishing and running for a party are lessened. If it cannot raise funds, a party cannot provide much support to its candidates, and will find it difficult to promote its message and platform to voters.

The absence of enabling legislation is not the sole reason for the lack of local parties in much of Canada, however. The fact that most provinces do not enable them is a product of voter sentiment. Voters in much of Canada are opposed to parties at the municipal level. Nevertheless, their introduction to municipal elections could address some of the shortcomings of existing electoral systems, particularly in large cities.

**Further Considerations**

Because other institutional factors, such as the strength of mayors, can influence and shape how electoral systems function, the following discussion of the positive and negative consequences of different varieties of electoral components makes two important assumptions.

First, this paper assumes that the executive, whether in the form of a mayor or otherwise, is relatively weak. This is true of most Canadian municipalities, where mayors wield limited institutional authority. Most lack the ability to veto council decisions, and many have limited control over appointments and municipal budgets. Weak mayor systems tend to place more authority in the hands of council as a whole and in the city manager or chief administrative officer. In contrast, systems with strong executives tend to concentrate authority in one or more individuals, while reducing the influence of municipal councils. The concentration of authority in one individual will necessarily affect the function of municipal government and erode the importance of city council elections, among other things.

Second, the following assessment of council size, ward vs. at-large systems, and FPTP vs. ranked ballot, assumes that there are no political parties. Like strong mayors, the existence of a political party system at the local level alters the nature of the electoral system. The subsection on partisanship in municipal elections that follows these discussions considers how the addition of political parties changes the nature of electoral systems.

**Evaluating the Strengths and Weaknesses of Electoral Components**

**Large vs. Small Council Sizes**

The debate over council size, while not as extensive and persistent as the debate over the use of FPTP or ranked ballots, remains pertinent today. For instance, in 2013, the Toronto Taxpayer Coalition petitioned the City of Toronto to reduce the number of councillors from 44 to 25, arguing that doing so would reduce costs and increase the efficiency of decision-making in council. Council voted against the reduction, but was clearly divided on the issue. Two years later, the City’s Toronto Ward Boundary Review introduced a range of alternatives to the existing 44-ward system to address the perceived lack of equity among the city’s communities. These alternatives included reducing council to 38 wards and expanding it to 58. Proponents of the latter argued more wards would improve residents’ access to councillors and enhance councillors’ ability to address the needs of their constituents.

In a ward-based system, the size of council directly influences the size of councillors’ constituencies. Even in an at-large system, the number of councillors available to residents could affect accessibility. As a result, those who advocate for greater access to city councillors will typically advocate for a larger council.

In practice, most large cities in Canada have wards with large constituencies that can hardly be termed local. Table 2 compares the average constituency size of councillors in a number of major cities. Even Halifax, with 15 councillors serving 390,000 residents, has an average constituency size of more than 26,000 residents, a population larger than many municipalities.

While the issue of council size will likely not resonate with residents in smaller municipalities, the size of council in medium-sized and large municipalities could, in theory, influence municipal governance. But what evidence is there that size actually matters?

Most research on council size emanates from the United States and focuses on the representation of visible minorities (specifically Blacks and Hispanics). This literature is largely inconclusive when estimating the effect of council size on representation. While early research suggested that large councils led to greater representation of both groups when
The potential and consequences of municipal electoral reform

they constitute a minority of residents in a municipality, later research challenged these findings, suggesting that council size has limited effect on the representation of ethnic minorities. Similarly, while large council sizes coupled with at-large elections were found to result in a greater number of women being elected, on its own, there is little evidence that council size influences the number of elected women.

Some limited research suggests, however, that large councils are more responsive to the interests of residents living in poverty, as smaller constituencies ensure a greater voice for people living in concentrations of poverty in a city. Large councils may also encourage greater voter engagement, as they reduce the threshold for entry into an election. That is, smaller constituencies lower the cost of running in an election and thus lower the barrier to entry. As a result, voters who would otherwise abstain from voting in the absence of a candidate who represents their interests may become more engaged.

Annie Frandsen further suggests, in discussing the work of Dahl and Tuft, that “citizens’ motivation to participate in community affairs is maximized in small communities, as a small unit often gives citizens a greater sense of solidarity and more effectiveness in their engagement.” Thus expanding the size of council may lead to better representation of certain marginalized communities and encourage greater voter turnout and engagement come election time.

Despite these benefits of large councils, there is also evidence of significant drawbacks. The same researchers who found greater representation of individuals in poverty under large councils also found that large councils tend to spend much more per capita than municipalities with small councils. Higher expenditure appears to arise from greater levels of parochialism and subsequent “pork barrel” spending. Pork barrel spending refers to expenditures on elected officials’ pet projects that typically benefit only their own constituencies.

Douglas Muzzio and Tim Tompkins also suggest that the greater number of seats and candidates in municipal elections may reduce the amount of media coverage and availability of information on any one candidate. As a result, the proliferation of candidates may make it harder for voters to make informed decisions. Indeed, elections in low-information municipal settings lead to higher incumbency rates, as voters turn to name recognition when choosing whom to vote for. Moreover, with limited information, voters may find it difficult to keep track of their councillor’s actions, thus hindering their ability to hold the councillor accountable come election time.

The smaller number of councillors in cities like Winnipeg or Calgary should make it easier to hold them accountable, as the position and influence of each councillor is more noticeable in a smaller council. The electorate in cities with smaller councils should be better informed about individual councillors and their behaviour than people in cities where a large number of councillors makes it difficult for the media and residents to keep track of who supported or opposed particular policies.

**Ward vs. At-large Systems**

Aside from the few large cities mentioned earlier in the paper – Vancouver, North Bay, etc. – most at-large systems in Canada are found in small municipalities, while larger municipalities employ ward systems. This distinction makes intuitive sense, as smaller municipalities, particularly those with only a few thousand residents, are less likely to have a diversity of communities needing representation on council, while larger municipalities need to ensure representation of a more heterogeneous population.
However, while debates over district magnitude may not be typical in Canada, it is and remains a hot topic in the United States, where questions of representation shape debates on electoral reform at the municipal level. Given the increasing diversity of Canada’s municipalities, and the lack of representation of visible minorities on many municipal councils (see Table 3), the issue may be more pertinent here than many realize.

As much of the literature comparing ward and at-large elections in the United States focuses on representation, academics tend to favour ward-based elections. Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that ward elections lead to better representation of ethnic minority communities when they are geographically concentrated, than at-large systems, both in policy-making and in the ethnicity of the elected representative. One of the few studies of at-large systems in Canada, written by an undergraduate student at the University of British Columbia, found that Surrey’s at-large system underrepresented visible minorities relative to ward systems.

Some studies of voting behaviour have also found that ward-based systems are less likely to result in voter fatigue than at-large systems. Voter fatigue occurs when voters fail to complete their ballot. Fatigue mainly affects voters with low political interest and knowledge, but evidence suggests that it does affect them, and that the more complex the ballot, the less likely voters will complete it. As an at-large election requires voters to vote for multiple city councillors at once, the likelihood of voter fatigue is great. For those concerned with voter turnout and engagement, these findings provide persuasive evidence in favour of wards.

That said, competing research has found that ward-based systems depress voter turnout over time when compared to at-large systems. Studies conducted by Charles Bullock found that, after initial bumps following the switch, voter turnout in municipalities that switch from an at-large system to a ward-based system declines eventually. Bullock suggests that the lower turnout in ward systems may reflect an absence of real competition in many wards. In the absence of a truly contested election, he argues, voters disengage. In contrast, he suggests that at-large elections “almost always spark competition.” Such a finding may cast doubt on the merits of a ward-based model. To further muddy the waters, however, more recent studies by J. Eric Oliver and Susan MacManus question Bullock’s conclusions, suggesting that district magnitude has little influence on voter turnout.

There is also evidence that ward-based elections lead to better constituency service relative to at-large ones. However, research into councillors’ behaviour suggests that those elected by ward focus on constituency interests to the detriment of citywide issues and policy. There is strong evidence that ward-based systems facilitate and even encourage parochialism and logrolling (the practice of councillors securing support for their pet projects by trading favours with other councillors). Such behaviour leads to greater expenditure, and a focus on major infrastructure projects – pork barrelling – over other services and infrastructure.

In contrast, at-large councillors tend to respond largely to citywide special-interest groups, rather than individual community interests. As a result, councillors elected at-large are less likely to demonstrate parochial behaviour and have no incentive to logroll. The distinction between the two systems, therefore, can lead to significant differences in decision-making. Because they inhibit parochialism, logrolling, and pork barrelling, research suggests that at-large systems function more efficiently and tend to focus planning and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Partisan or Non-Partisan</th>
<th>% of Women on Council*</th>
<th>% of Visible Minorities on Council*</th>
<th>Visible Minorities as % of Total Pop.**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Montréal</td>
<td>Partisan</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vancouver</td>
<td>Partisan</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>Non-Partisan</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calgary</td>
<td>Non-Partisan</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winnipeg</td>
<td>Non-Partisan</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Based on the composition of city councils as of May 2017
**Source: Statistics Canada 2006 Community Profiles
policy-making on the betterment of the entire city, while relying more heavily on the expert knowledge of city staff.

First-past-the-post vs. Ranked Ballots

How votes should be allocated remains a hot-button issue in Canada. The controversy surrounding the Trudeau government’s decision to scrap reforms to the federal electoral system reflects this fact. At the federal level, the most ardent supporters of reform tend to advocate for a system that ensures every party receives seats in the House of Commons equal to their popular vote in the election (a system known as proportional representation). The Trudeau government, however, favoured a ranked-ballot system, not unlike that proposed for municipalities in Ontario. Many cynics criticized the government’s stance because they felt such a system would favour the Liberal Party. In the end, the government claimed that there was not enough popular support to go ahead with reform, so Canadians will continue to elect their MPs via first-past-the-post for the foreseeable future.

As the comparison of FPTP to ranked ballots in Table 1 revealed, the electoral formula can have a more demonstrable effect on election outcomes than changes to council size or moving from a ward-based to an at-large system. As a result, the debate over FPTP and its alternatives often takes centre stage in the discussion of electoral reform. However, would changing from FPTP to ranked ballots actually “fix” the issues many individuals have with the current system?

First, one of the major flaws of the first-past-the-post system is that victorious candidates can and often do win with a minority of voter support. For instance, in one extreme case – the contest for ward 20 in the 2014 Toronto municipal election – the victorious candidate won with only 17 percent of the popular vote. Opponents of FPTP at the municipal level believe that elected officials cannot rightly claim to be representative of the interests of their constituents with such low levels of support. While “majority” victories won as a result of a ranked-ballot system are not true majorities, as the victorious candidates will often be the second or third choice of many voters, they do improve a winning candidate’s claim to represent the majority of constituents’ interests.

Second, there is empirical evidence to support the claim made by groups like the Ranked Ballot Initiative of Toronto (RaBIT), that ranked ballots reduce strategic voting. Strategic voting occurs when voters vote for a candidate who is not their primary choice, because they believe their own candidate cannot win.

In order to ensure the least desirable candidate does not win, strategic voters will choose a candidate closer to their preferred choice who has a chance of winning. During the 2014 Toronto mayoral election, many political pundits and journalists claimed that the eventual winner, John Tory, benefited from strategic voting, as supporters for other major candidates rallied behind him to prevent the election of Doug Ford.

Ending strategic voting is an important aim of proponents of municipal electoral reform, because voters who engage in strategic voting may contribute to electoral outcomes that go against their preferred outcome. Strategic voting requires the ability to accurately gauge candidates’ chances of victory. The low-information environment of municipal elections, however, makes accurately forecasting results very difficult, particularly for council members; thus, voters may misidentify the leading candidates or underestimate the strength of their own candidate. Proponents of ranked ballots also argue that by giving voters greater choice – by allowing them to vote for their preferred candidate without fearing that their vote will be meaningless – more voters will participate in elections.

Third, a ranked-ballot system should make it harder for incumbents to win when a majority opposes them, another concern of opponents of FPTP. In the absence of a party system, and particularly where a ward system is in place, FPTP can make it difficult for voters to hold elected officials to account, as an incumbent candidate does not need a majority of the vote to win re-election. As a result, if a majority of voters want to get rid of an incumbent, but are unable to coalesce behind an alternative, the incumbent may win the election with what support she or he retains. In contrast, under a ranked-ballot system, incumbent candidates need to win a majority to be re-elected. Therefore, if the majority of voters choose not to rank the incumbent, then the incumbent should be defeated.

A recent study of four ranked-ballot elections in the United States questions these claims, however. The researchers found a high level of “ballot exhaustion,” which led to candidates’ winning without a majority of the vote in all four elections. Ballot exhaustion occurs when none of the candidates that a voter ranks wins the election. While ballot exhaustion is more likely to occur when voters choose fewer candidates than permissible, the study found that even when voters ranked the total allowable number of candidates, a large number of voters still did not see one of their preferences elected. For example, in the 2011 San Francisco municipal election, 22.5 percent of ballots cast with the total allotment of candidates did not select the victor.
these findings, the benefits of a ranked-ballot formula may be in doubt.

Research on voting in San Francisco, which has employed a ranked-ballot system since 2004 (see Box 2), also calls into question the utility of such a system. For instance, several studies have found that many voters find ranked ballots confusing. The relative complexity of ranked ballots led many voters to overvote – voting and ranking more candidates than allowed, thus spoiling their ballot. This issue was especially pronounced among foreign-born voters and voters with lower levels of education.42 The researchers who conducted these studies suggest that overvoting among such groups reduces the “equality of voice” among voters43 and obscures “the process by which voters in urban elections translate racial group interests into voting decisions.”44 In comparison, the simplicity of FPTP limits the likelihood of such problems impacting election outcomes.45 Despite such concerns, some advocates for ranked ballots suggest the issue of overvoting could be overcome with greater education and increasing familiarity with the system.46

However, undervoting – voting for fewer candidates than one is allowed to vote for – is a recurring problem in San Francisco, which reflects the complexity of the ranked-ballot system and the limited information available to voters in municipal elections, a problem that would likely remain even with greater voter education. In the absence of sufficient information, many voters in a ranked-ballot system vote for fewer candidates than permissible, or for only one candidate.47 This fact can exacerbate ballot exhaustion, thereby undermining one of the principal benefits of ranked ballots over FPTP: the election of candidates by a majority.48

**In the absence of sufficient information, many voters in a ranked-ballot system vote for fewer candidates than permissible, or for only one candidate.**

**Political Parties**

With the exception of a few large municipalities in British Columbia (notably Vancouver and Surrey) and most large municipalities in Quebec, political parties at the local level remain unacceptable throughout most of Canada. Not surprisingly, opposition to the introduction of parties at the municipal level are based largely on voters’ evaluation of party systems at the provincial and federal level. Many opponents of political party systems believe the tradition of party discipline at senior levels of government erodes community representation, as elected officials are more beholden to their party than to their constituents. When parties are in place, the ability of a councillor to wholly focus on the needs of his or her constituents will necessarily be curtailed by the needs of the party as whole. As a result, councillors may make decisions that run counter to the interests of their specific constituents.50

While literature comparing elected official responsiveness to constituents in partisan and non-partisan environments is scarce, a study comparing independent councillors to partisan councillors in English municipalities found that independents were more responsive to and representative of constituents’ interests.51 For those who consider representation of community interests the central purpose of municipal and local government, the study’s findings make a compelling case for the continued exclusion of political parties at the local level. However, for those more concerned with representation of traditionally marginalized groups, such as women and visible minorities, and with holding elected officials accountable, municipal political parties may be a valid alternative to non-partisan systems.

In non-partisan elections, candidates must assemble their own funds for a campaign. According to one study, this fact tends to favour candidates with greater name recognition and wider networks developed through their position in society (e.g., a member of the Chamber of Commerce).52 While the domination of municipal politics by white men has eroded since the publication of the study, the weight of non-partisan elections place on name recognition and personal networks still tends to favour the affluent and members of majority groups. In contrast, political parties may have an incentive to cater to the interests of the marginalized and minorities, thus increasing their representation.53

In practice in Canada, municipal parties have had some success in increasing the representation of women on city councils. In the 2013 Montréal municipal election, for instance, 42 percent of candidates elected to city council were women (excluding the mayor). In Vancouver, following the 2014 election, women made up half of city council. In contrast, in non-partisan cities, such as Toronto, Calgary, and Winnipeg, women account for a much smaller proportion of councillors (see Table 3).

Despite their success in electing women, however, partisan elections at the local level have little effect on the representation of visible minorities and other marginalized groups when compared with non-partisan systems. As Table 3 shows, in Vancouver and Montréal, visible minorities are substantially underrepresented on city council. Of 10 city councillors in Vancouver, eight are not visible minorities, while two are of Chinese descent, even though visible minorities account for 51 percent of the city’s population. In Montréal, representation of visible minorities on council is even worse, with only two out of 64 city councillors identifying as visible minorities.

Major cities without parties fare no better, however. In Calgary, only one of the 14 city councillors identifies as a visible minority, while in Toronto, only five of 44 councillors are visible minorities, in a city where half of the population...
Box 2: How Ranked Ballots Work in San Francisco

Explanation: The sample ballot below is for the election of a Member of the Board of Supervisors for District 5 in the 2004 San Francisco municipal election. In total, 27 candidates ran in District 5. The Board of Supervisors in San Francisco is roughly the equivalent of a municipal council in Canada. A district is equivalent to a single-member ward.

The ballot contains voting instructions in three different languages. Voters are asked to indicate their first choice of candidate in the first column, their second choice of candidate in the second column, and their third in the third column. Voters would be expected to do the same for the election of other positions, such as mayor.

Unlike the example in Table 1, candidates in San Francisco are eliminated one at a time. As a result, there can be multiple rounds (or “passes”) of reallocating votes among candidates. In the election of the Board Supervisor for District 5, 18 candidates were dropped before Ross Mirkarimi was declared the victor with more than 50 percent of the vote. In fact, Mirkarimi won with far less than 50 percent of the popular vote, as 13,144 of 39,255 ballots were exhausted by the final round of reallocation. That is, over a third of the electorate did not rank one of the three remaining candidates as their first, second, or third choice in the nineteenth and final phase of reallocation.49

Source: Reproduced from FairVote (n.d.) in Neely and Cook (2008, pg. 532, fig. 1).
identifies as such. Surprisingly, given the lower proportion of residents in Winnipeg identifying as visible minorities, its council comes closest to representing visible minorities’ share of the population.

Beyond questions of representation (of communities or the marginalized), the main argument in favour of introducing political parties to the local level may be their tendency to simplify voting and enable voters to hold elected officials to account. A significant body of literature has demonstrated repeatedly that when parties are present in an election, voters use partisan ties as a shortcut when deciding how to vote.\(^54\) That is, they determine which party they will vote for, and use that information to choose which candidate to support. In elections where information on individual candidates is scarce, as in many municipal elections, a candidate’s party affiliation is an easy way for voters to identify which one best represents their beliefs and interests. Because there will be far fewer parties in an election than individual candidates, voters and news media can focus on the party platforms to identify the position of individual candidates.\(^55\)

With greater access to information on candidates’ platforms, based on partisan ties, voters should be less likely to use incumbency as a cue when voting. The high rate at which incumbents are re-elected in Canadian municipalities is often associated with name recognition and the higher profiles of incumbents.\(^56\) Many voters vote for the incumbent based on name recognition alone, because they lack sufficient information about other candidates.\(^57\) Since the presence of political parties simplifies voters’ access to information – in the form of party platforms – while decreasing the quantity of information necessary to make an informed decision, voters may be less likely to vote for an incumbent. Reducing the rate of incumbency and the length of tenure of incumbents is often the target of organizations supporting electoral reform.\(^58\) Thus, the introduction of political parties should appeal to these organizations.

Moreover, political parties may also make it much easier for voters to hold elected officials, particularly city councillors, to account in municipal elections. Municipal electoral systems often make attributing policy decisions to individual councillors very difficult. As a result, voters may have a hard time determining whether they should punish or support their incumbent candidate based on past performance.\(^59\) With a party system in place, particularly one with strong party discipline, voters do not need to account for all the actions of their individual councillor, but can hold the governing party accountable as a whole.

The ability to use partisan affiliation as a means to evaluate individual city councillors’ performance would likely address the tendency for voters to approve of their councillor, but not city council as a whole.\(^60\) If voters are not happy with the current direction of the municipality, they can vote against the incumbent councillor if he or she is a member of the ruling party, or they can support a candidate from an opposition party. Voters can even hold opposition parties to account if they feel the party has failed in its duty to residents.

Table 4 summarizes the relationship (positive or negative) between each electoral component discussed in the paper and the five electoral objectives identified in Box 1.
Designing an Electoral System

While understanding and evaluating the merits of the elements that comprise municipal elections is important, such elements are but part of a larger system. To truly understand and evaluate an electoral system, one must consider how these components work together and influence electoral outcomes. This section considers how varieties of different electoral components may complement one another by addressing each other’s shortfalls.

Some components are incompatible. One cannot practically use a ranked-ballot system for electing councillors in a partisan, at-large contest. In fact, the combination of partisanship and an at-large election would allow for other electoral formulas, such as proportional representation (where parties are allocated seats based on their popular vote), that would not otherwise be possible in single-member ward or non-partisan elections.

Also, when considering electoral systems and their relative strengths and weaknesses, one must take into account the population and demographics of a municipality, its geographic size, and the nature of its political and governmental institutions. Given the obvious complexity of assessing and designing an electoral system, this section focuses on each of the four electoral components and their varieties and considers how municipal context and the compatibility of different elements can influence voting behaviour, electoral outcome, and municipal governance.

Council Size, Wards, and At-large Elections

The most important factors to consider when determining the appropriate size of a municipal council and whether a ward or at-large system is appropriate are the population of the municipality; its geographic size; the number and diversity of identifiable communities; the geographic concentration and population of minority groups; and the strength of the mayor.

Where municipalities are small and homogenous, a small council elected at large may be appropriate. For municipalities that consist of one identifiable community, there may be little justification for the introduction of a ward system, as each councillor will effectively be representing the same community regardless of ward boundaries. Also, in smaller cities, the barrier to entry for candidates will remain low, as will the overall intelligibility of the election, and residents will retain the ability to engage with both candidates and elected officials. In their study of municipal elections in Ontario, Joseph Kushner, David Siegel, and Hannah Stanwick found that smaller municipalities had higher turnout rates than medium-sized and large municipalities, a fact likely resulting from the closeness of candidates to their constituents.  

In contrast, for diverse medium-sized and large municipalities, the erosion of constituency representation resulting from small councils and at-large elections will override any improvements in accountability and functionality, as will the loss of minority representation under an at-large system. The introduction of party systems, while eroding constituency representation to some extent, may be a better option for achieving greater functionality and accountability in larger municipalities.

However, if a municipality has a stable party system, an at-large system coupled with a proportional representation electoral formula may be appropriate, if there are enough seats on council to effectively apportion the popular vote by party. For instance, given the large size of its city council, and if its party system were to stabilize in the future, Montréal might be a candidate for such a system, whereas Vancouver, with its 10-seat council might not, as a party would have to win 10 percent of the popular vote to secure a single seat on council.

FPTP vs. Ranked Ballot

In the absence of political parties, a FPTP system for electing councillors is the only practical alternative for council elections in at-large systems. However, a ranked-ballot system is a strong candidate for replacing FPTP in ward elections, as it may improve voter engagement and accountability. Ranked ballots have their weaknesses, however. For example, voters under a ranked-ballot formula require much more information to make an informed decision than they do under FPTP, and studies have found that the complexity of the ballot itself may lead to lower turnout and inadvertent ballot spoiling among certain societal groups.

The latter issue may not be as pressing as it seems, however. More effective outreach to communities where language barriers may be a problem and increasing familiarity with the system through its regular use may address lower turnout and voting difficulties.

Nonetheless, in a low-information environment, issues of complexity remain. It is unlikely, for instance, that the introduction of ranked ballots will immediately overcome high incumbency rates among municipal councillors, as the formula will do little to enhance voter knowledge of
alternative candidates. However, in large cities where mayoral contests receive significant media attention, any information deficiency should be reduced. Thus, it may be worthwhile for cities such as Toronto, Calgary, or Ottawa to adopt the ranked ballot for the mayoral race, while retaining FPTP for council elections. Alternatively, the introduction of political parties could overcome the information barrier and allow the use of ranked ballots at the council level, as the use of party cues and media coverage should provide voters with enough information to make an informed decision.

Political Parties

Lastly, the primary benefit of political parties at the municipal level is their potential to increase voter turnout and engagement while increasing political accountability. The main issue with political parties is their tendency to erode direct representation of individual constituency interests, and voters’ perception that parties lead to more politics and less governing.

Given the general aversion to municipal political parties and lack of legislation enabling them outside Québec and B.C., the likelihood that they will be introduced at the municipal level in much of Canada is limited. However, it may be possible to achieve some benefits of a party system, particularly its ability to overcome the low-information nature of municipal elections, without having a formalized party system and enabling legislation.

In provinces without enabling legislation, slates of candidates running on a shared platform may offer a solution to low information in council elections while avoiding the erosion of constituency representation. Running as a slate with a shared platform will likely improve media exposure for candidates, making it easier for voters to evaluate council candidates, whether they are running at large or in wards. Since without enabling legislation, candidates cannot rely on party funding and campaign support, strong party discipline would not be an issue, as candidates’ electoral success and campaign financing would be based largely on their own efforts. Such a system would also make holding council accountable easier, as voters can attribute council decisions to the dominant slate of elected officials on council.

The benefits of such a system would likely be realized only in larger municipalities. Given the number of larger municipalities in Canada with weak mayors and single-member wards, such a system could be a useful addition to municipal elections. The introduction of such a quasi-party system would require the collective effort of candidates and greater voter acceptance of party-like systems, however.

Final Thoughts

There are many legitimate reasons to consider or support electoral reform, such as increasing voter turnout and engagement or enhancing the representation of traditionally marginalized groups. Any argument for reform must clearly state such reasons and keep them at the forefront of the ensuing debate, however.

One of the recurring issues arising from debate over reform is a tendency for proponents of reform to come across as sore losers. That is, without a strong message about the purpose of reform, supporters or those indifferent to the existing system may feel advocates of change are motivated largely by their discontent with the outcome of elections. The argument for reform should be based on the merits of reform in and of itself, not because a reformed system may enhance the chances of one or another preferred candidate. Such motives will not galvanize the public in support of change, as the federal government recently discovered.

At the same time, advocates of reform should be prepared for disappointment when change is instituted. Theoretical concepts do not always lead to the expected outcomes in practice. For instance, supporters of ranked ballots often argue that a move away from FPTP will chip away at high incumbency rates among municipal councillors. The underlying assumption they are making, which is borne out in research, is that incumbents often win due to lack of real competition in council elections. There is no guarantee, however, that a ranked-ballot system will change this imbalance. By way of example, my colleagues and I found in a study of incumbency rates in Toronto that 68 percent of incumbents running for re-election in 2014 won with a majority of the vote. On average, incumbent councillors won re-election with roughly 60 percent of the popular vote.62

Municipal elections are complex, and no one change will address all the problems in an existing system. In fact, with change can come new problems, as in San Francisco’s experience with ranked ballots. Voters are also complex, and cannot be expected to behave in a predictable manner when the rules change. This is no reason to avoid change, however. If there is a real chance that reform can lead to positive change, then the electorate should be willing to consider reform. At the same time, proponents of reform must be upfront about potential positive and negative consequences...
of change and acknowledge that the outcome may be unknowable.

**Endnotes**


5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.


15. Langbein, Crewson, and Brasher, Rethinking ward and at-large elections, 1996.


32 Dalenberg and Duffy-Deno, At-large versus ward elections, 1991; Southwick, Local government spending, 1997.

33 Moore, Decentralized decision-making, 2016.


38 RaBIT, Benefits of ranked ballots, n.d.


40 RaBIT, Benefits of ranked ballots, n.d.


43 McDaniel, Writing the rules to rank the candidates, 2015; Neely and McDaniel, Overvoting and the equality of voice, 2015.

44 McDaniel, Writing the rules to rank the candidates, 2015.


58 See, for example, RaBIT, Benefits of ranked ballots, n.d.


