

The Electoral Process

The basics

Canada's political system is based on that of the United Kingdom. It is a constitutional monarchy, composed of the Queen of Canada, who is officially represented by the Governor General (or by a lieutenant-governor at the provincial and territorial levels), and Parliament.

The federal Parliament consists of the Senate (upper chamber), which normally has 105 members appointed by the Governor General on the recommendation of the Prime Minister, and the House of Commons (lower chamber), with 308 members elected by citizens who vote in general elections or by-elections. The Government originates in the elected House of Commons. According to the principle of constitutional monarchy, the Queen, therefore, rules but does not govern.

The Constitution Acts of 1867 and 1982 set the maximum time between federal general elections at five years, except in time of real or apprehended war, invasion or insurrection. An election can be called earlier if the Prime Minister so chooses or if the Government is defeated on a motion of confidence in the House of Commons. Parliament is currently (in 2007) examining Bill C-16, which would implement fixed election dates every four years on the third Monday in October, subject to an earlier dissolution of Parliament.

After an election, the party with the most elected representatives normally forms the Government. Its leader becomes the Prime Minister and chooses people (usually members of the House of Commons of his or her party) to head the various government departments under the designation of ministers. The Prime Minister can also appoint ministers without portfolio – known as ministers of State – or members of the Senate to Cabinet.

If the party with the largest number of seats in the House of Commons does not have a simple majority of seats, its leader, the Prime Minister, may attempt to maintain a minority government by seeking strategic support from members who are in the opposition. Since Confederation in 1867, Canadians have elected 10 minority governments, which lasted 1.4 years on average, and 29 majority governments with an average term of 4.1 years. Appendix 3 provides further details on Canadian governments since Confederation.

Representation in the House of Commons

Representation in the House of Commons is based on geographical divisions known as electoral districts, commonly referred to as ridings. The number of electoral districts is established

through a formula set out in the *Constitution Act, 1867*, and one member of Parliament (MP) is elected in each electoral district.

First past the post

Canada's electoral system is referred to as a "single-member plurality" or "first-past-the-post" system. In every electoral district, the candidate with the most votes wins a seat in the House of Commons and represents that electoral district as its member of Parliament. An absolute majority (more than 50 percent of the votes in the electoral district) is not required for a candidate to be elected.

Pillars of electoral democracy

Over time, Canadians have come to trust the outcome of elections as truly reflecting their collective will without political interference. Political parties and candidates entering the political arena have also learned they can respect the fairness of the electoral process. Together, these conditions contribute to a meaningful and peaceful environment for elections and a lively and long-lasting democracy.

Secrecy and privacy

Voting in Canada is by secret ballot. The security of the ballot is paramount, and the system makes it impossible to discover for whom a specific voter has voted. Furthermore, a ballot cast with a mark that could potentially allow identification of the voter has to be rejected. This is to ensure that no electors are intimidated or bribed into voting in a particular way. Intimidation and bribery, as well as any attempt to reveal how an elector has voted or is going to vote, is an offence under the *Canada Elections Act*.

General election countdown

The election call

The Prime Minister asks the Governor General to dissolve the House of Commons (or the Government loses a confidence vote in the House of Commons).

The Governor General issues a proclamation dissolving Parliament and directing that the writs of election be issued.

The Chief Electoral Officer issues writs that direct returning officers to hold an election in each electoral district.

Returning officers open their offices.

Voting by special ballot begins.

Elections Canada sends preliminary lists of electors to returning officers.
 Preliminary candidates and party election expenses limits are calculated.
 Revision of the lists of electors begins.
 Returning officers mail voter information cards to registered electors.
 Returning officers receive candidates' nomination papers and deposits.
 Canadian Forces electors begin voting.
 Voting at advance polls takes place.
 Voting by incarcerated electors and those in acute care hospitals begins.
 Revision ends, and the deadline for special ballot registration expires.
 Revised candidate and party election expenses limits are calculated.

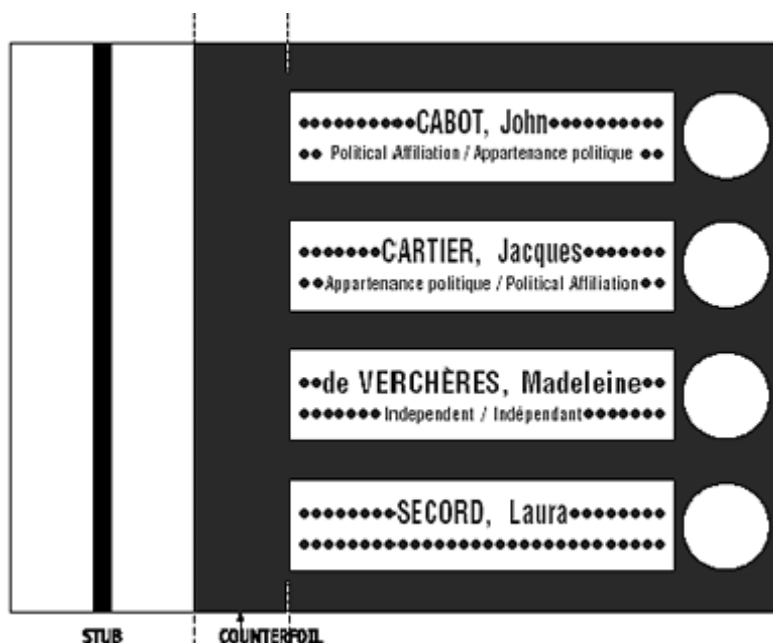
Election day

Electors vote at ordinary and mobile polling stations.
 Preliminary voting results are available after the polls close across the country.

Wrap-up

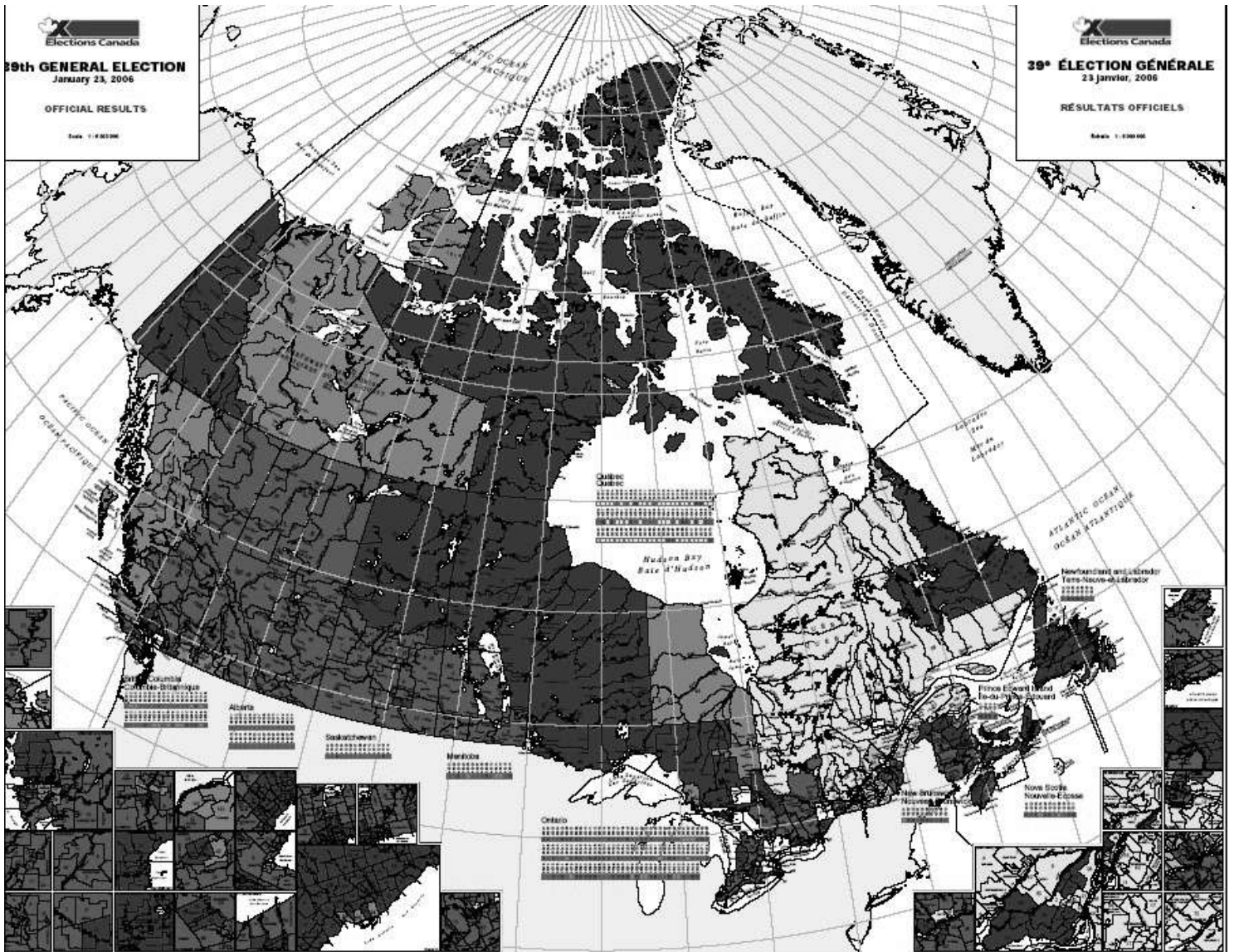
Returning officers carry out the validation of the results.
 Judicial recounts are conducted if necessary.
 Returning officers return the writs, which declare the winning candidate in each riding.
 New members of Parliament are sworn in, and the new Parliament is convened.
 The Chief Electoral Officer reports on the election and the official results.
 Candidates, political parties and third parties submit financial reports.
 Reimbursement of expenses to candidates and political parties takes place.
 Candidates dispose of surplus funds.

Voting



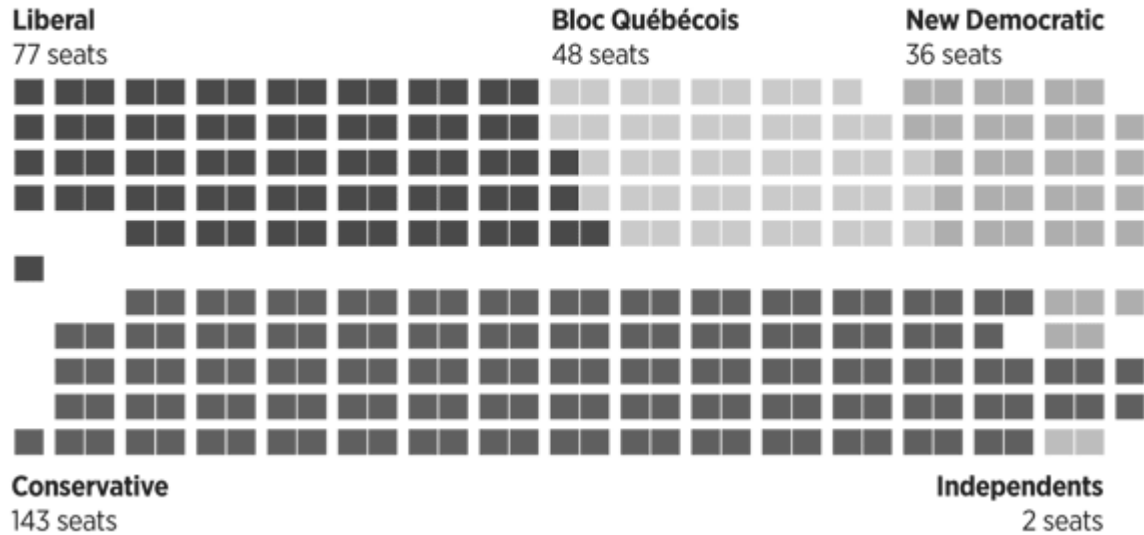
There are a number of ways to vote. The most common way is at the polls on election day. Voters can also cast their ballots at an advance poll, or they can vote by special ballot, either at the office of the returning officer or through the mail. As additional services, Elections Canada provides mobile polls for voters living in chronic care institutions and, in certain cases, bedside voting by special ballot for voters in acute care hospitals. In exceptional

circumstances – where a voter is registered for a special ballot but cannot go to the office of the returning officer or mark the ballot because of a disability – an election officer can go to the voter’s home to help mark and receive the ballot in the presence of a witness.



Canada and Electoral Reform

What Parliament looks like today with the First-Past-the-Post electoral system:



What Parliament might look like today if PR properly aligned popular vote with seats:

