



Women's Political Representation & Electoral Systems

Equal Voice, Written Submission on Electoral Reform

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British Columbians are grappling with the prospect of changes to our First Past the Post electoral system. The consultation phase represents an enormous opportunity to better understand the limitations and opportunities of electoral systems generally. This overview generated by Equal Voice is designed to promote an enhanced understanding among British Columbians of what is at stake for women in this process. We expect it will also serve as a catalyst for further dialogue.

Fundamentally, women are major contributors to all aspects of British Columbia, and it is clear we need more of them to lend their energy and expertise to politics. Women currently comprise 38 percent of Members of the Legislative Assembly, the highest anywhere in Canada, but we still have a way to go to achieve equality. The percentage of women among our elected representatives is now no higher than it was before the May 2017 election and we can and must do better.

As a national, multi-partisan organization, Equal Voice is not in a position to endorse a particular electoral system. We do, however, believe in devising a made-in-B.C. solution that considers the effects of any and all changes to the political process writ large on women's participation in politics.

What we know is that at every stage of the current system, there is a significant opportunity to improve the conditions under which women opt into politics, particularly as prospective candidates. In general, many aspects of politics must change if the electoral arena is to be regarded by many more women as a rewarding and realistic proposition that leverages their talents and leadership abilities.

The adoption of a new electoral system could also hold significant promise for women in British Columbia. But it is all in the design. As this overview reveals, no system is perfect and, therefore, it is crucial that we pay close attention to the details of the discussion and what it means for women in politics in our province and beyond.



The Provincial Context

There is a lot to celebrate in British Columbia:

- ❖ Parity has been achieved in the provincial cabinet.
- ❖ In the last election, women made 46% of all candidates for the major three parties, including more than half of those running for the NDP.
- ❖ Women are better represented in British Columbia than they are anywhere else in the country.

But we have a way to go:

- ❖ At 38%, women remain under-represented in the Legislature.
- ❖ Change over time has slowed.
 - Following the 2017 election, women's representation increased by just one percentage point. This modest gain was erased after the recent by-election in Kelowna.
- ❖ Women are running in harder ridings.
 - For both major parties, women were over-represented in ridings where their party lost by more than 10-percentage points in the 2013 election. They were also under-represented in ridings their party won by more than 10-points.

Key Recommendations

- ❖ The review and decision-making process regarding electoral reform should recognize and consider the effect on women's representation of all parts and features of the electoral system.
 - This should include a consideration of the different effects on the *number of women* and the *amount women can do to address issues* that disproportionality affect women.
- ❖ Changes to the nomination process and not just the voting system should be evaluated and implemented.
- ❖ An on-going consideration of retention issues and political culture is necessary to increase the representation of women.
- ❖ Efforts to ensure women's participation in any future consultation, public engagement, or similar process on the question of electoral reform.

'Women's Political Representation'

Women's political representation is usually understood in terms of the number of women elected – this is called ***descriptive representation***.



Women's political representation may also be understood as the representation of issues or interests that disproportionality affect women, like sexual assault or domestic violence. This is called **substantive representation**.

Descriptive representation and substantive representation are **distinct but connected** – women in politics are more likely to view themselves as representatives of women. They also do more than men to prioritize policy issues that have important and distinct effects on women's lives.

Women in the Political Process

Before they become MLAs, women must:



Barriers to equality of participation and representation can occur at any of these three steps on the way to becoming an MLA.

Women and Electoral Systems

Women's **descriptive representation** tends to be higher under **proportional representation systems**. According to the United Nations, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and the Global Database of Quotas for Women, worldwide women hold more than 25% of seats in countries that use proportional electoral systems and less than 20% in those countries that use plurality/majority systems. Mixed systems fall in the middle with women's representation sitting at nearly 23% on average.

Why does PR increase women's representation?

District magnitude, i.e. the number of seats per constituency is larger in proportional representation system than it is in plurality or majoritarian systems. This means that parties can more easily balance their candidates between women and men in any given constituency. Parties may do so because it is important to



them or to appeal to voters who want to see more equality in politics. When one party balances their electoral lists, other parties are also pressured to do so - a phenomenon called **contagion**.

A greater district magnitude also means that parties do not need to choose between running an incumbent or a qualified male candidate and running a woman – they can do both. Because most incumbents are men, incumbency is often considered the glass ceiling for women in politics. A larger district magnitude makes it easier to break through this barrier.

PR systems that use lists and have a larger district magnitude are also **easier to combine with proactive policies to increase women's representation**. Quotas may be voluntary - where some parties commit to running a certain proportion of women - or they may be legislated - where all parties are required to have a minimum number of women on their lists.

Proportional representation is not sufficient.

Political culture and retention of women MLAs once they are elected also matter.

Countries with the highest level of representation tend to have PR *and* use proactive measures like quotas.

For example, before Ireland adopted a quota, women comprised just 16% of representatives in its Lower house despite the use of an STV proportional system. In February 2016, the first election using the new quota system was held and women's representation increased to 22%. This is still well below the representation of women in British Columbia under a plurality system.

Diversity in Proportional Representation Systems – Consequences for Representation

While PR systems are associated with the election of more women, they are not one thing. Rather, these systems are extremely diverse and vary on multiple dimensions:

- District magnitude: how many representatives are elected per constituency?
- Determining the candidates: who controls access to and rank on a party list – party leadership, party members, or voters at large?



- Who citizens cast their vote for: do citizens vote for a party or an individual candidate?
- The use of preferential ballots: can citizens indicate a preference for more than one candidate? Can voters express preferences for candidates in different parties?
- How preference votes are counted: can votes cast for individual candidates actually change the order of the list provided by the party? In other words, are lists open or closed?

For example, in the PR portion of Germany's mixed system, voters pick a party but cannot express a preference for an individual candidate. In the Netherlands, voters can indicate a preference for a *single* candidate, while voters in Belgium can indicate a preference for multiple candidates. Voters in Switzerland have the most choice and can vote for candidates from multiple parties and can even cross out candidates or vote for a candidate more than once.

Even though voters in Belgium and the Netherlands can express preferences for candidates, these votes rarely change the order of the list established by the party. In Brazil and Finland, on the other hand, the candidates elected from a given party depend on the number of votes they receive as individuals. In Spain, lists are determined by parties and they remain 'closed' and cannot be changed by voters.

These differences are not mechanical or minor details. They **have major consequences for women's political representation.**

PR systems with larger district magnitudes have higher levels of women's representation. Studies also show that when parties maintain control over who is elected, women do better. For example, if parties determine the composition and rank on the electoral list, more women are elected. This may be because parties use their power to run more women to match party values or to appeal to or meet the expectations of voters.

The features of a PR list system that increase descriptive representation, however, simultaneously decrease substantive representation. More party control over the election of candidates in PR systems reduces the amount individual women can do to pursue women's issues, specifically, once elected. This may be because women must focus on party priorities to ensure their re-election.



On the other hand, greater voter control over who is elected increases the power of the electorate and frees politicians from strict party discipline. In these systems, women have been observed to do more to represent women and spend more time on issues that disproportionately affect their lives.

Weakening the party's role, however, has the effect of decreasing descriptive representation – the number of women. Given the political head start that many of their male colleagues have in the form of social capital, the so-called old boys club, incumbency advantages, and differential resources (like the gendered wage gap), women appear to have a harder time overcoming barriers to participation when they rely on personal rather than party votes.

In other words, the detailed features of a list PR system matter for women's representation and differentially affect descriptive and substantive representation. For this reason, **a consideration of women in politics and the input of groups concerned with women's representation must be incorporated at all stages of the review and decision-making process, from the type of electoral system to the more mechanical details of how that system will work.**

The Nomination Process: A critical barrier to equality of participation and representation

Women have reported that the cost and lack of predictability and transparency of the nomination process is, for some, a major disincentive **Changes to the electoral system can and should include changes to the nomination process.** Specific improvements to the transparency and predictability of nominations, as well as imperatives for all parties to actively recruit women and other individuals from under-represented groups, would go a long way to improving the outcomes for women in all of their diversity.

Changes over the last year in a half in Alberta and Ontario mean that nomination races are now subject to financing rules, as they are in other Canadian jurisdictions, including New Brunswick and during federal elections, for example. Consideration an extension of the new BC campaign finance rules to nomination rules may offer a straightforward and productive first step.

Some proactive measures have been successful at the candidacy stage. While controversial both in and outside the party, the NDP's Equity Seeking Mandate, has resulted in more women running in key winnable ridings. Federally, the party has



instituted a practice of holding off on nominations until riding associations have demonstrated that they have sought out women and other under-represented groups. This strategy has also been successful – in the 2015 federal election, 43% of the candidates running for the NDP were women compared to just 31% of Liberals and less than 20% of Conservatives.

In the UK, the Labour party holds nomination races that are reserved for women called “all-women shortlists”. This maintains a competitive process while ensuring women run in winnable ridings under the Labour party banner. This strategy has also been successful. Since the 2017 British election, women have made up 45% of the Labour party caucus compared to just 21% of the governing Conservative party.

Any changes to the electoral system should continue to allow parties to develop their own proactive strategies for increasing women’s representation.

Public Campaign Financing

In 2017, New Brunswick made changes to the public finances of political parties after elections. Per vote subsidies in future elections will be 1.5 times larger for votes cast for women than those cast for men. The new rules will reward parties for running for women, and especially for running women in competitive and winnable ridings. The recent introduction of public per-vote subsidies for BC elections offers an important, if short-term, opportunity to improve women’s representation in BC. The electoral reform process should consider similar opportunities.

After Election: Retaining Women MLAs

Once women self-select into the political process, become candidates, and win elections, they can choose to run again or not. Ongoing consideration of how to improve the life of MLAs with families, the strain of travel, and issues around confrontation, aggressive, or even sexist political culture can ensure that women, once they opt in, stay in the political system. In the time of #MeToo, clear policies on behaviour and appropriate and effective sexual harassment policies are absolutely necessary.

Engaging Women in the Reform Process

Equal Voice remains concerned about women’s participation in consultation process itself. As the discussion continues, the voices of women, particularly from underrepresented groups like Indigenous British Columbians, must be brought to the fore.



During the federal process, women's voices were a minority. Less than one-third of witnesses to the Electoral Reform Committee were women, and women were even more poorly represented among those that were invited to present their individual expert opinions. Fewer than one in five individuals who submitted written comments were women as were just one in three of those who responded to the electronic survey. In other words, women were no better represented in this process than they are in politics.

As this process continues here in our province, efforts must be made to ensure this is not the case in British Columbia.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit feedback for your consideration.

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