

# Women and Electoral Reform

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Imagine a Vancouver where the city councillors roughly represent the make up of the city's citizens. Among them are 5 women and a variety of people from groups that once were considered "under-represented minorities". Together they represent several parties as well as independents and a plurality of political voices that add rigour and richness to political debates. Imagine voters who get on the bus, ride their bike, walk and drive to the poll because they are motivated to vote by hearing their values voiced on the Council. This will be our city when we have an electoral system that removes barriers to genuine participation by women and under-represented minorities and instead implements mechanisms that facilitate fair and equal participation during elections and throughout each term. Far-fetched pipedream? Not at all.

## Women and Electoral Politics

This submission focuses on women because women are consistently under-represented in electoral politics. Not only is this fundamentally undemocratic in a representative democracy, but moreover, this leads to the systematic exclusion of women's voices and concerns from political debates and public policy solutions. This paper will describe the current situation for women and the principal reason for our under-representation. It will look at the impact of women's under-representation as well as the benefits of increasing women's representation. It will then discuss the three main solutions that have been implemented in many countries around the world to increase the number of women elected: 1) the implementation of one of the proportional representation systems, 2) proactive measures that purposefully increase women's representation, and 3) campaign financial reforms. The paper will look at how these solutions could function in the City of Vancouver.

## What is an electoral system?

Democracy is a means for exercising power, and within the political realm, this power is structured by an electoral system that reflects and represents our values and beliefs as a society expressed through various political parties and individuals competing to govern. An electoral system is a means for translating the popular vote expressed in an election into seats in government. But an election is not the end goal of democracy, it is simply the means by which we achieve the objective of democracy, which is to allow the population to choose who they wish to have represent them in government<sup>1</sup>.

## Why change the electoral system?

In the history of the First Past the Post electoral system that we have in Vancouver there has been a systemic under-representation of women, or put differently, an ongoing over-representation of men, among elected officials. Women make up roughly 51% of the city's population yet have never made up 51% of Council, nor has there ever been a female Mayor. See Table 1 for statistics on the number of women councillors in Vancouver in the last decade. While women have seen higher levels of representation on

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<sup>1</sup> Mouvement Democratie Nouvelle – Memoire presented to the Commission des institutions de l'Assemblee nationale du Quebec, Fall 2002.

the Parks Board and among School Trustees, these boards do not have the same scope of power as the City Council and the Mayoral Office.

**Table 1: History of Women’s Representation on Vancouver City Council:**

Election Year	Number of women elected		Women councillors as a % of all councillors
	Government	Opposition	
1993	3	1	40%
1996	3	0	30%
1999	3	0	30%
2002	2	0	20%

Source: City of Vancouver website.

This situation is not specific to Vancouver. In 1991, *The Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing* released its extensive study on Canada’s electoral system. The Commission found that women’s under-representation was a significant problem and that women are the most under-represented segment of Canadian society.

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities reported that in September 2002, 27.7% of city councillors in BC were women and 20.4% of mayors were women. These numbers show that women’s representation in BC is slightly higher on average than that in most other provinces, and they show that in 2002, Vancouver had a higher number of women councillors than the BC average. (See appendix A for the total number of women elected into these positions across all provinces and territories.) However, the number of women councillors has dropped since the November 2002 election. Even with somewhat higher percentages of women in BC than elsewhere in Canada, the numbers of women councillors are still well below the total percentage of women in our society and they are below the critical mass level of 30% that is required to create significant shifts in policy based on women’s interests (see below for more detail). If we use the average number of women mayors in 2002 as a proxy for an average over time, then Vancouver has been significantly below average in the number of women mayors elected.

The result of women’s under-representation is that policies that affect women or that are of particular concern to women such as a public childcare system, violence against women, national pensions, and affordable housing have not been adequately addressed or have not been addressed at all within political debates and policies. Jane Jenson has observed that the universe of political discourse "filters and delineates political activity of all kinds"<sup>2</sup>, which in the case of women marginalizes the collective identity of women and issues of concern to women. Further, coupled with a lack of will among political elites to share power equitably between women and men, and an electoral system that is recognized as less apt to favour female candidacies present significant barriers to women in getting elected, this appears to translate into a subtle but potent discouragement and

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Peckford, Nancy, “A Mandate for Equality”, [http://www.nawl.ca/brief-electoral-reform.htm#\\_1\\_3](http://www.nawl.ca/brief-electoral-reform.htm#_1_3), accessed 03/29/04.

alienation of female citizens<sup>3</sup>, fewer women wishing to run for political office, and widespread disillusionment among Canada's young women (and men).

Numerous studies show a correlation between the presence of women in elected office and the degree to which women's issues are addressed in the political sphere. Tremblay has commented that "if the state has contributed to the definition of women's citizenship, women have likewise demanded that the state intervene on a diverse number of areas: violence against women, child support payments, abortion, and reproductive technologies" (liberal translation).<sup>4</sup> Peckford documents that "legislative assemblies in Scandinavian countries have demonstrated that meaningful shifts in policy are not likely to occur until women are represented well above the 20 per cent mark. Though there is no consensus on a 'magic' number for women, the United Nations has identified 30 per cent as constituting critical mass for women's representation (Cheema 1999).<sup>5</sup>

Given the absence of women's representation and perspectives to provide for full and complete political debate and policy, our existing electoral system does not adequately serve women, and therefore cannot be understood as respecting the democratic will of fully half of the population. What can change this is the equal representation of women in elected politics. What then does it take to get more women elected?

Data reveals that a higher percentage of women are elected in proportional representation systems when coupled with proactive measures to increase women's representation, such as gender parity on party lists, or incentives that target a minimum percentage of each gender. In addition, financial limits are a concrete way of levelling the playing field to enable access to more candidates for elected office, including women. Underlying these electoral reforms, of course, is the will to increase women's representation in electoral politics.

### **Proportional Representation**

In a study of 24 democracies over the post-World War II period by International IDEA, data indicates a marked increase in women's representation in the 1970s – 1990s in systems with proportional representation. In contrast, as shown in Table 2 below, only modest gains arose in majoritarian systems such as our own First Past the Post system. There was only a slight increase in women's representation over the past decade in the Canadian House of Commons from 17.6% in 1993 to 20.6% in the 2000 elections. Whereas, countries with a proportional representation system usually in combination with incentives have on average double the number of elected women representatives.

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<sup>3</sup> Steele, Jackie, "Synthesis Report on the Proceedings of the National Roundtable on Women and Politics 2003", *National Association of Women and the Law*, Ottawa, April 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Tremblay, Manon, *Des femmes au Parlement: Une stratégie féministe?*, les éditions remue-ménage, Montréal, 1999, p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> Peckford, Nancy, "A Mandate for Equality", [http://www.nawl.ca/brief-electoral-reform.htm#\\_1\\_3](http://www.nawl.ca/brief-electoral-reform.htm#_1_3), accessed 03/29/04. See also, Bystydzienski, Jill, *Women in Electoral Politics: Lessons from Norway*, Westport, London, 1995.

**Table 2: Percent of Women MPs across 24 National Legislatures from 1945-1998**

<b>Majoritarian vs. Proportional Representation Systems</b>							
<b>System</b>	<b>1945</b>	<b>1950</b>	<b>1960</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>1998</b>
<b>SMD</b>	3.05	2.13	2.51	2.23	3.37	8.16	11.64
<b>MMD</b>	2.93	4.73	5.47	5.86	11.89	18.13	23.03
<b>SMD: Majoritarian or single-member district (SMD) systems are used in:</b>  Australia, Canada, France (1960~), Japan, New Zealand (1945-1990), United Kingdom and United States.				<b>MMD: Proportional representation or multi-member district (MMD) systems are used in:</b>  Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France (1945 & 1950), Greece*, Iceland Ireland, Israel**, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand (1998), Norway, Portugal*, Spain*, Sweden, Switzerland and Germany (West Germany** prior to 1990).			
* Greece, Portugal and Spain became democratic in the 1970s and are therefore only included in the 1980, 1990 and 1998 calculations.  ** Israel did not exist and West Germany did not hold elections in 1945. They are therefore not included in the 1945 numbers. They are included for all years following 1945.							

Source: Data compiled by International IDEA and presented by Jackie Steele, 2003.<sup>6</sup>

In its various forms, proportional representation systems are the most widespread among democratic countries. Denmark, Holland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, New Zealand, Costa Rica, Germany, Italy, France, Belgium, Ireland, Wales, and Scotland, among many other countries, all have an electoral system using some form of proportional representation. Deputies to the European Union are elected by a proportional representation system, as are members of the London City Council.<sup>7</sup> Great Britain, the inventor of the First Past the Post system, is favourably viewing a report from 2000 suggesting changes that include forms of proportional representation.<sup>8</sup> In Canada, in addition to efforts being made here in BC, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island are also exploring different avenues for electoral reform.

<sup>6</sup> Steele, Jackie, and Nancy Peckford, "Information Sheet 2.0: Effects of Electoral Systems on Women's Representation", *National Association of Women and the Law*, March 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Mouvement Democratie Nouvelle – Memoire presented to the Commission des institutions de l'Assemblée nationale du Quebec, Fall 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Mouvement Democratie Nouvelle – Memoire presented to the Commission des institutions de l'Assemblée nationale du Quebec, Fall 2002, p.15

Why have so many democratic countries adopted an electoral system using one of the forms of proportional representation whether at municipal or federal levels? The answer lies in the ability of proportional representation systems to more fairly represent voters' wishes.

### **What is Proportional Representation?**

Proportional representation refers to a broad spectrum of electoral systems that are used to translate the popular vote a party received into a number of seats that is roughly proportional to the percentage of the support from the electorate. For example, in the last municipal election, COPE earned about 46.7%<sup>9</sup> of the popular vote but took 80% of the council seats (and would have taken 100% had they run a full slate). In other words, the number of seats that COPE won was significantly disproportionate to the percentage of people who voted for them. Similarly, some parties that received a smaller minority of votes received no seats at all – also disproportionate to the percentage of people who voted for them. This is a constant feature of the First Past the Post majoritarian electoral system in Canada at the municipal, provincial and federal levels.

The First Past the Post system has its roots in the British Westminster electoral model and was adopted by past British colonies. There are only four democratic countries left with a First Past the Post electoral system, and they are England, Canada, the USA and India.

### **Proactive Measures to Increase Women's Representation**

While an electoral system based on proportional representation better reflects voters' choices and allows access to those who have typically faced systemic barriers to getting elected, there is an additional barrier that exists for women that it does not directly address, and that is women's access to party nominations.<sup>10</sup> Steele and Peckford state that "not only are women and other marginalized groups excluded in the recruitment processes, those who manage to gain access to the system have to be significantly more qualified to earn the confidence of the party gatekeepers".<sup>11</sup>

Implementing proactive measures in combination with a proportional representation system can help the number of women elected rise even higher. An example of a proactive measure that would be familiar to us in BC is the provincial Citizen's Assembly selection process. It was based on regional representation from across the province with one woman and one man selected from each of the regions.

Table 3 below provides a comparison of some of the countries with a proportional representation system that have implemented a proactive measure to increase the number of women elected versus countries with a proportional representation system that have not implemented any incentives. It shows that in countries without any incentive,

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<sup>9</sup> West, Julian; Think City presentation made on April 7, 2004 and found at [www.julianwest.ca](http://www.julianwest.ca).

<sup>10</sup> See Black, Jerome, and Lynda Erickson, "Similarity, Compensation, or Difference? A Comparison of Female and Male Office-Seekers", *Women and Politics*, 21:4, 2000; Black, Jerome, "Ethnoracial Minorities in the Canadian House of Commons: The Case of the 36<sup>th</sup> Parliament", *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 32: 2, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Steele, Jackie, and Nancy Peckford, "Information Sheet 3.0: Electoral Systems and Their Public Policy Outcomes", *National Association of Women and the Law*, March 2003.

women's representation is at on average 21.1% as in Canada, and in countries with incentives, women's representation is at on average 33.2%.

<b>Table 3: Percent of Women in the National Legislatures of Countries Using Proactive Measures for Women Versus Countries Without Incentives</b>						
<b>Countries with Incentives</b>	<b>Nature of the Incentive</b>	<b>Election Date</b>	<b>% of Women</b>	<b>Countries without Incentives</b>	<b>Election Date</b>	<b>% of Women</b>
<b>Argentina</b>	Legislated Quota: 40%-60% both sexes	2001	30.7%	<b>Belgium</b>	1999	23.3%
<b>Austria</b>	Party Quota: Greens began in 1993: 50% (zipper system)	2002	31.1%	<b>Germany</b>	2002	32.2%
<b>Costa Rica</b>	Legislated Quota: 40% women	2001	35%	<b>Greece</b>	2000	8.7%
<b>Denmark</b>	Party Quota: 40% women (Soc.-Dem. Party began in 1988 for local and regional elections)	2001	38%	<b>Iceland</b>	1999	34.9%
<b>Finland</b>	Legislated Quota: 40% women (for all relevant bodies)	1999	36.5%	<b>Ireland</b>	2002	13.3%
<b>France</b>	Legislated Quota 50% (zipper system) (not in all districts)	2002	12.1%	<b>Israel</b>	1999	14.2%
<b>Mozambique</b>	Party Quota 30% women (Frelimo Party began in 1999)	1999	30%	<b>Italy</b>	2001	9.8%
<b>Namibia</b>	Legislated Quota 30% women (Started in 1992 in local elections)	1999	25%	<b>New Zealand</b>	2002	29.2%
<b>Norway</b>	Party Quota 40% women (Labour Party began in 1983)	2001	36.4%	<b>Portugal</b>	2002	29.2%
<b>South Africa</b>	Legislated Quota 50% women (for local elections)	1999	29.8%	<b>Spain</b>	2000	24.3%
<b>Sweden</b>	Party Quota 50% women (zipper system) (Soc.-Dem. Party began in 1994)			<b>Switzerland</b>	1999	23%
<b>Average Percent of Women</b>			<b>33.2%</b>	<b>Average Percent of Women</b>		<b>21.1%</b>

Source: Compiled by Jackie Steele using data from the websites of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and International IDEA.<sup>12</sup>

Because proportional representation alone has not been able to bring up the number of elected women to parity, there are many countries that use proactive measures to increase women’s representation. As shown in Table 4, the countries that rank among the top eight in terms of women’s representation all use proactive incentives in combination with a form of proportional representation. Women’s representation in these eight countries ranges between 32.2% and 45%. This compares to 21% in Canada.

**Table 4: Top 8 Countries by Women’s Representation in Parliament in 2002**

Rank	Country	Electoral System	Proactive measures	National Assemblies, Houses of Common, Unique or Lower Houses in 2002		
				Total seats	Number of women elected	% of women elected
1	Sweden	Pro rep	Yes	349	157	45
2	Denmark	Pro rep	Yes	179	68	38
3	Finland	Pro rep	Yes	200	73	36.5
4	Norway	Pro rep	Yes	165	60	36.4
5	Costa Rica	Pro rep	Yes	57	20	35.1
6	Iceland	Pro rep	Yes	63	22	34.9
7	Netherlands	Pro rep	Yes	150	51	34
8	Germany	Mixed Pro rep	Yes	603	194	32.2

Source: Memoire presented to the Commission des institutions by the Federation des femmes du Quebec, November 2002.

### **Proposed Electoral Systems for Vancouver**

With the goal of making Vancouver’s electoral system more democratic and to increase the number of women and under-represented minorities elected at City Council, let’s take a look at how proportional representation and proactive measures could be applied to at large, mixed and ward systems.

#### **1. For an At Large System:**

There are two proportional representation electoral systems that can be used in an at large system. These two systems best allow the proportion of seats to be allocated based on the percentage of total votes. They are combined with proactive measures to increase women’s representation.

##### **a) Single transferable vote (STV) with two ballots**

STV is a system of proportional representation that allows the public to rank all of the candidates. In this system, the individual candidate is more important than the party to which they belong. Not only does the voter rank the candidate of the

<sup>12</sup> Steele, Jackie, and Nancy Peckford, “Information Sheet 2.0: Effects of Electoral Systems on Women’s Representation”, *National Association of Women and the Law*, March 2003.

party they want, at the same time they are ranking all of the candidates together regardless of party affiliation which can allow greater access to independents.

To increase the number of women representatives, rather than ranking all the candidates on one ballot, a voter would receive two ballots. The voter would rank the male candidates on one ballot and the female candidates on the other ballot. As mentioned, this is similar to the proactive measure that the provincial government used to select members for the Citizens Assembly.

### **b) Closed party lists with proactive measures (zippering)**

A Party List system is a form of proportional representation that allows the voter to vote for their preferred party. This system formalizes voting for a party slate while ensuring proportional outcomes.

How it works:

- Each party submits a ranked list of candidates.
- Each voter then votes for the party list that they like.
- Each party is allocated seats based on the proportion of the voters who voted for them.
- The seats are then filled with the topped ranked candidates from each party's list. For example, if there are 10 council seats and a party receives 20% of the total vote, the top two candidates on that party's list would be elected.
- To ensure women representatives are elected, a proactive measure would require that the party list alternate between female and male candidates (ie, woman, man, woman, man, etc.). This is called “zippering”.

### **2. For a Ward System:**

The same proactive measure is used here, too, where each voter has two votes for their ward and votes for one woman and one man. However, because it is a First Past the Post majoritarian electoral system, it is likely not going to proportionately reflect the voters' wishes city-wide.

### **3. For A Mixed System:**

This system is a combination of both of one of the At Large systems and the Ward System mentioned above.

Whichever system is preferred, the point of this submission is to highlight the need to act on increasing women's representation.

### **Financial Reform**

In addition to proportional representation systems and proactive measures to address the imbalance between men and women among elected officials, financial reforms are a necessary tool for removing the systemic barriers to women in getting the party nomination. Financial reforms promote democracy as a sphere where ideas, not money, are the common currency guiding the governance of our city.

*The Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing* released in 1991 recommended the following measures:

- Spending limits on nomination campaigns
- Permitting nomination donations to count as tax credits
- Making child care expenses an allowable tax deduction (or, we would add, rebates provided through the city or through provincial legislation)
- Reimbursing parties who run more women (eg., % return of total expenses based on the total % of women elected up to 50%)

### **Conclusion**

In summary, women are the most under-represented group in Canadian electoral politics and this impoverishes political debates and decisions and highlights a “democratic deficit” in our electoral system. The First Past the Post electoral system that we have currently prevents women from achieving parity among elected officials. Without specific proactive measures to increase the representation of women, no electoral system can by itself guarantee the equal representation of women in government, but there is a category of electoral systems that is more favourable to women and under-represented minorities, and that is proportional representation. In addition, proactive measures can be used to increase women’s representation and begin to allow women to reach parity. Lastly, financial reforms for campaigns are necessary to reduce barriers to women’s access to the party nomination. Happily, we see successful examples of these three areas of electoral systems being used in many democratic countries around the world.

The objective of this submission is to ensure that the Commission and the public are aware of the concrete ways to increase the number of elected women representatives. Therefore, we strongly urge Commissioner Tom Berger to include the following recommendations in his report on reforming the electoral system in Vancouver:

- Adopt a proportional representation voting system.
- Implement proactive measures to increase women's representation to parity with our numbers in the population.
- Introduce campaign financing reforms, particularly with regards to nomination campaign spending limits.

With these reforms to Vancouver’s electoral system, we can begin to imagine a Vancouver where our City Councillors reflect the diversity of our citizens and where there are multiple political voices adding rigour and richness to political debates and decisions. The opportunity to imagine a truly democratic society is upon us, and there is no better time to strengthen the democratic values and principles that we hold dear as a community than now.

## Appendix A

See document entitled

<<VERC\_Women\_&\_Electoral\_Reform\_Appendix\_A\_April\_2004>>