The First-Past-the-Post Electoral System

How First-Past-the-Post Works
In Canada, candidates are elected under the single member plurality electoral system (SMP). Like many other former British colonies, Canada inherited the single member plurality system from Great Britain. The history of the system precedes Confederation; it was first used to elect members to the Nova Scotia legislature in 1758.

There are three main features that distinguish single member plurality from other types of electoral systems in the world:
• Candidates represent a specific geographic area, called a riding district;
• There is only one member elected in each riding district;
• Votes are counted on a district-by-district basis for the individual candidates, not for political parties; and,
• In order to win a riding, a candidate does not need to receive a clear majority (considered 50 percent plus one) of the votes. Instead, the candidate only needs to receive a relative majority (also called a plurality majority), meaning that he/she received more votes than any other candidate in the riding district. Under the single member plurality system, a candidate can win a riding even though the majority of voters voted against him.

The single member plurality system is often referred to as the ‘first-past-the-post’ system simply because, in a sense, it can be characterized as a race.

Positive and Negative Features of the First Past the Post Electoral System
There is both support for, and criticism against, the first-past-the-post system. Arguments on both sides stem primarily from three key features:
• It tends to produce majority governments. Canada has had 38 federal elections since Confederation; only eight have resulted in minority governments.
• It tends to over-reward major parties, and under-reward smaller parties. Under SMP it is all too common for major parties to receive a higher percentage of seats than their share of the popular vote, while smaller parties receive fewer seats. For example, in the June 2004 federal election, the Green Party received 4.3 percent of the popular vote, but did not win any seats. Similarly, the NDP received 15.69 percent of the popular vote, but won only 19 out of 308 (approximately six percent) of House of Commons seats. By contrast, despite being reduced to a minority government, the Liberals still received a higher percentage of seats than their share of the popular vote (the party received 36.7 percent of the popular vote, but won nearly 44 percent of the seats). The trend becomes even clearer when looking at the 2000 federal election, where 40.8 of the popular vote was enough to give the Liberals over 55 percent of the seats, and a clear parliamentary majority.

It is very common for a party (or candidate) to win a majority of seats without winning a majority of votes. Between 1900 and 2004, Canadians elected 21 majority governments at the federal level, but only ten actually received over 50 percent of the popular vote.

Benefits of the First Past the Post Electoral System
While the first past the post system has been greatly criticized in recent years, it does have several advantages over other types of systems. These include:
• It tends to produce stable governments.
• It tends to produce a strong opposition party (both the winning party and the main opposition party often receive a higher number of seats than their share of the popular vote).
• It allows voters to support a local candidate who represents the geographical area in which they live
• It allows individuals who are not members of a political party to run as independents.
• It is easy for voters to understand how the system works.
• It tends to provide a clear-cut contest between two major parties.

Still, advocates of electoral reform in Canada have pointed out several flaws with the first past the post system. These include:
• It is possible for the political party that received the second highest number of votes to win the election. This happened in the 1957 and 1979 federal elections, and in the 1996 BC election.
• It is very difficult for smaller parties with a national base – such as the NDP or the Green Party – to win seats.
On the other hand, smaller parties with a strong regional base may get a “seat bonus,” winning more seats than their corresponding share of the popular vote. This party may claim to ‘speak’ for that region, even though the majority of people in the region may not have voted for the party.

Voters who support smaller political parties may become discouraged with the political process. For example, those who voted for the Green Party in the 2004 federal election may feel their votes were wasted, since the Green Party did not win any seats.

Women and minorities are under-represented in the legislatures of many countries with first past the post electoral systems

Why Did Canada Choose the Single Member Plurality Electoral System?
Historically speaking, there were several reasons why the Fathers of Confederation chose to implement the single member plurality electoral system for Canadian federal elections:

• The single member plurality system was already being used in several colonial legislatures, such as Nova Scotia.
• In the 1800s, there were only two main political parties operating at the federal level. Under SMP, one of these parties was guaranteed to win a majority government.
• The need for a stable majority government was considered more important than it is today. One important reason: a clear-cut majority made it possible for the government to pursue major policy objectives, such as building a national railroad.

Today, advocates of electoral reform believe Canadian society has changed significantly – to the point where the drawbacks of the single member plurality system outweigh its advantages.

Example:
Country X is divided into 10 ridings of 10 voters each.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>% Vote</th>
<th>% Seats</th>
<th>No. Seats</th>
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