

Weighted Member Proportional Representation

Presentation to the Special Committee on Democratic and Electoral Reform

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Victoria, BC
July 2025*

Introduction

Proportional representation is the idea that a political party's representation in the Legislature should be proportional to the number of people who voted for its candidates. Proponents of PR typically defend some variation on a small class of electoral systems: Mixed Member systems (including Dual Member PR), Single Transferable Vote, or some combination of those systems (e.g., Rural-Urban PR).

What all the variations have in common is that they apparently require trade-offs to be made in balancing competing values in the design of electoral systems. For example, the usual PR suspects all require expanded electoral districts in order to achieve reasonably proportional outcomes without significantly expanding the size of the Legislature, which is arguably at odds with the goal of effective local representation. Debates about PR thus frequently devolve into discussions about the relative pros & cons of the ways in which different versions of PR may trade off different values against each other, with little prospect of resolving disagreements.

My aim here is to completely sidestep these debates by describing a version of PR which requires none of the usual trade-offs. It does not require any changes to the way we currently elect MLA's. It does not require changes to our existing electoral boundaries. It does not require multi-member districts, or expanding the size of the Legislature.¹ Moreover, unlike the systems listed above, it does not merely *tend* towards more proportional outcomes (so that the degree of proportionality becomes one of the values to be traded off against simplicity, local representation, etc.). The system I am recommending is guaranteed to be *perfectly proportional* (within the constraints imposed by an electoral threshold which limits the influence of small, often extreme "fringe" parties).

I refer to this system as *Weighted Member Proportional Representation*, for reasons which will be evident. The core idea is that, rather than stretching and prodding our electoral system in an attempt to force it to produce somewhat more proportional outcomes, we

¹ With one minor exception, to be discussed shortly.

can achieve full proportionality quite easily by keeping our current system intact and simply adjusting the weights that MLA's votes carry in the Legislature. I do not claim any originality for this idea. The basic idea has been around for many years.² If there is any novelty in what follows, it lies only in spelling out the idea as clearly and simply as I can, so that anyone interested in electoral reform can easily judge the proposal on its merits.

WMPR in a nutshell

As mentioned, implementing WMPR does not require any changes to electoral boundaries or the way we currently elect members to the Legislature. Ballots would look exactly the same as they do now, voters would select one candidate, and the candidate with the most votes would win the seat.

Under our current system, votes which do not contribute to electing a winner using this "single-member plurality" method of electing representatives are simply... *discarded*. The votes in question are frequently a majority of the votes cast in each riding, but they do not contribute to electing anyone, and there's precious little evidence that they make any real difference to the subsequent business of government. They are "wasted" votes, in the sense that if they had never been cast, nothing would be very different. (I can't think of a better way of discouraging people from participating in the democratic process than telling them that if they vote, there's a significantly better than even chance that it won't make any difference at all to anyone or anything!)

WMPR refuses to throw away perfectly good votes. Whether or not a vote contributes directly to a candidate being elected, each of those votes counts (in *equal measure*!) towards the parties' share of the popular vote. WMPR uses those shares to determine a weighting for each member's vote in the Legislature, which is arrived at by dividing the party's share of the popular vote by its share of the seats.

For example, if the Conservatives win 40% of the popular vote, but manage to capture 60% of the seats in the Legislature, each Conservative member's vote on legislative matters would be weighted by a factor of 2/3. On the other hand, if the Greens win 6% of the popular vote but only 3% of the seats in the Legislature, then their members'

² It featured prominently in several submissions to the House of Commons Special Committee on Electoral Reform in 2016. See, e.g., <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/ERRE/Brief/BR8398933/br-external/SchellenbertPaul-e.pdf>; <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/ERRE/Brief/BR8397890/br-external/WilsonJames-e.pdf>; <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/ERRE/Brief/BR8474581/br-external/ReidMarilyn-e.pdf>; <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/ERRE/Brief/BR8549539/br-external/StillichJohn-e.pdf>; <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/ERRE/Brief/BR8584956/br-external/DeLaMatterDoug-e.pdf>. The idea has been around longer than that, however. I recall discussing it with some of my colleagues in 2005, in the lead-up to the referendum on BC-STV. I do not recall how it entered our discussions, but the idea is so natural that it seems likely to me that it has occurred to many people on many occasions over the years.

votes on legislative matters would be weighted by a factor of 2. If there are 93 seats in the House, as at present, then the total votes of all the parties will still add up to 93. But instead of those votes being apportioned equally to the MLA's ("one MLA, one vote"), they are allocated to MLA's in proportion to their party's share of the popular vote.³

That's it, in a nutshell. There are some details of implementation which need to be addressed, but apart from the differential weighting of MLA's votes, everything would proceed more-or-less exactly as it does now. Following an election, the Chief Electoral Officer would determine which party has the most votes in the House, the Lieutenant Governor would invite the leader of that party to form Government, and then the real business of governing would begin!

A few details...

I hope the foregoing has demonstrated that WMPR is easy to explain, and also easy to motivate. In order to implement WMPR, we would need to make some decisions about a few things. There's room for debate about them, but in my view none of them are particularly contentious – there are no deal-breakers here. They're worth taking brief notice of in order to gain a fuller understanding of how WMPR would be implemented.

1. PR systems typically adopt an *electoral threshold* in order to limit the influence of fringe parties and prevent excessive fragmentation of the House. Parties which fail to meet the threshold are not entitled to proportional representation in the Legislature.

A common suggestion is to fix the threshold at 5% of the popular vote, which seems like a good starting place for discussion. A party which receives 5% of the popular vote almost certainly deserves full representation in the House (note that in our last general election, 5% of the popular vote amounted to more than 105,000 votes), whereas a party which receives only .5% of the popular vote probably doesn't.⁴

2. A party may exceed the electoral threshold but fail to elect any members under single-member plurality voting. If a party has no seats in the Legislature, there's nothing that can be weighted to determine how much influence it will have on legislative matters.

3 In essence, WMPR sacrifices the principle "one MLA, one vote" in order to ensure that the principle "one person, one vote" is maximally effective. There's no real sacrifice involved, of course, since there's nothing sacrosanct about the principle "one MLA, one vote", whereas the other principle is constitutionally guaranteed.

4 It's important to realize that failure to meet the electoral threshold does not *exclude* representation in the House. A party which fails to meet the threshold might nevertheless succeed in electing a member to the Legislature. Since the party has not met the electoral threshold and is therefore not entitled to proportional representation in the House, this member would effectively sit as an Independent (see detail #3 below).

An obvious remedy in such cases is to declare one or more of the party's candidates elected. I personally favor awarding up to 2 of these "top-up" seats to any party which exceeds the electoral threshold but fails to elect at least 2 members. This not only allows for proportional weighting of those members' votes in the Legislature, but also ensures that every party which meets the electoral threshold has official party status. The top-up seats would be awarded to whichever of the party's candidates won the highest share of the popular vote within their ridings, and they would represent their ridings exactly the same way the S-MP winners do.

3. We also need to make a decision about how to accommodate Independent members under WMPR. Since they're not affiliated with any party whose share of the popular vote could be used to weight their legislative vote, the most sensible way to accommodate them is to fix the weight of their vote at 1, and make a slight corresponding adjustment to the weights of the official parties' members.⁵

Advantages

WMPR has many clear advantages over our current electoral system, as well as other PR systems. I'll conclude by highlighting a few of them.

- WMPR obviates the need for strategic voting. This is true of PR systems in general, but it's particularly obvious in the case of WMPR. If a voter is concerned to minimize the influence of one party, a vote for any of the other parties is equally effective.
- WMPR makes gerrymandering (whether intentional or accidental) impossible, since every vote has exactly as much influence on the popular vote as every other, regardless of where it's cast.
- A related point: under WMPR there's no need for the Electoral Boundaries Commission to fret over finding the right compromise between keeping ridings in sparsely populated areas of the province manageable and trying to ensure that everyone's vote is roughly as effective as everyone else's across the province. Once the weight of MLA's votes in the House are decoupled from their mere

⁵ Independents are of course elected by winning a larger share of the popular vote in their riding than the other candidates, and it might be supposed that their vote in the Legislature should be weighted by this share. This would seriously underweight Independent's votes, however, on the basis of an apples-to-oranges comparison. The other members are also elected by winning a larger share of the popular vote within their ridings than their competitors, but this share plays no direct role in weighting their votes. In essence, each member enters the Legislature with 1 vote, regardless of how decisively they won their seat, and then that vote is adjusted upwards or downwards depending on whether their party is under-represented or over-represented in the House. Since there's no coherent basis for claiming that an Independent is under- or over-represented, their vote should remain at 1.

presence in the House, it matters little that some MLA's are elected with a few thousand votes and others with many thousands.

- WMPR would likely encourage parties to campaign seriously in all areas of the province, and not only in ridings they thought were "winnable". A Green vote in Peace River South counts just as much towards the party's popular vote as a Green vote in West Vancouver-Sea to Sky.
- As noted above, whereas other PR systems merely tend towards proportionality, WMPR guarantees *perfect proportionality*. This is no small advantage. Under WMPR, every single person who votes for a party which meets the electoral threshold can know *for certain* that their vote makes a small but nevertheless real difference to the business of the House. That strikes me as an excellent way of encouraging greater participation in the democratic enterprise.
- The biggest advantage of WMPR is that it is by far the simplest means of implementing proportional representation. It requires virtually no changes to our current electoral system, and could be implemented quickly at very little cost. It could easily be implemented by the present Government in time for the 2028 general election. It doesn't require a Citizens' Assembly or another referendum. All that's required is the political will to make it happen – the courage to stop throwing away citizens' votes and pretending that it's OK to do so in a mature democracy.