

The Results of the Three Ontario Votes Project

Since it launched on September 17, more than 9000 people have visited the Three Ontario Votes website. These visitors had the opportunity to learn about three different electoral systems: the first-past-the-post system (FPTP) currently used in Ontario, the alternative vote (AV) and proportional representation (PR). They also had the unique opportunity to cast their vote in the provincial election using three different voting system ballots. As promised, we have analyzed the data to see what we can learn from the ballots that were submitted.

In Table 1, we show the vote distribution for the three voting systems among all the site visitors who were eligible to vote and who cast a ballot in each of the three voting systems. In the case of the alternative vote, we report the support for candidates ranked first. For the FPTP vote, the results put the Ontario Liberal Party first, the New Democratic Party of Ontario second, and the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario a distinct third. Clearly, the people who visited the website do not constitute a representative sample of the electorate. Most importantly, Progressive Conservative voters are strongly underrepresented, and this bias must be kept in mind in the analyses that follow.

Table 1. Votes Cast Under Three Different Electoral Systems

	FPTP	AV (% of first place votes)	PR
Liberal	47.5%	41.2%	39.4%
PC	10.5%	10.4%	8.8%
NDP	32.4%	34.4%	34.8%
Green	8.2%	11.7%	12.1%
Other	1.5%	2.4%	5.0%
N		4178	

Although our sample is not representative, the data are still useful to better understand how voters' choices may be affected by a different electoral system. What fraction of our participants voted differently in the two other systems than under FPTP? It turns out that 12% voted for a party (as their first choice) under the AV system that is not the one they supported in the FPTP election; the equivalent percentage is 18% for the PR system. The great majority of voters chose to cast their ballots the same way, but it is notable that a substantial minority behaved differently.

Which party(ies) would benefit from the alternative vote or proportional representation? Table 2 presents the actual vote obtained by the various parties in the FPTP election held on October 6. We also indicate the distribution of votes under AV (first preferences) and PR when we weight our data to match the actual election outcome. More specifically, this correction for the distribution of party support in our sample means that each individual who voted for the Progressive Conservative Party in the FPTP election is given a weight of 3.4 to adjust the proportion of PC supporters in the sample to the 35% support that the party actually got; in the same vein, Liberal voters are given a weight of 0.8 to match their party's actual vote percentage.

Table 2. Actual FPTP Election Outcome and Weighted AV and PR Vote Results

	FPTP (actual election outcome)	AV (first preferences)	PR
Liberal	37.6%	33.6%	32.1%
PC	35.4%	32.7%	28.4%
NDP	22.7%	24.6%	26.2%
Green	2.9%	6.5%	7.2%
Other	1.3%	2.6%	6.2%

Our data suggest that the Greens would get almost 7% of first preference votes under the AV system, compared to 3% under FPTP. Other candidates from small parties (there are 21 registered political parties in Ontario) would also get more votes. The Liberals would get 34% of first preference votes in an AV system, 4 points less than their actual FPTP votes. The Progressive Conservatives would see a decrease in their support and the NDP would see an increase. It thus appears that the Liberals and PCs benefit from FPTP, receiving support from some voters who actually prefer smaller parties that are disadvantaged by the system.

As was explained on the website, the outcome of an AV election differs from a FPTP election because the result also depends on voters' second, or even third, choices. Table 3 shows the link between people's first and second choices, as indicated by their party rankings on the AV ballots. An overwhelming majority (67%) of those who ranked the Liberals first chose the NDP as their second option. Similarly, a majority (56%) of those whose first preference vote was for the NDP candidate ranked the Liberal candidate second. The pattern is not as clear for those who ranked the Progressive Conservative candidate first. Among Green supporters second votes are mostly distributed between the NDP and the Liberals.

Table 3. AV First and Second Preferences

AV Second Preferences	AV First Preferences				
	Liberal	PC	NDP	Green	Other
	Liberal	33.2%	55.8%	41.1%	13.0%
	PC	9.1%	4.1%	7.6%	19.0%
	NDP	67.3%	27.7%	46.8%	24.0%
	Green	21.1%	35.3%		23.0%
	Other	2.6%	4.8%	4.5%	21.0%
	N	4177			

Under a PR system, our data indicate that the vote shares of the parties would change even more than under AV. The Liberals would get 32% of the vote, the PCs would get 28%, the NDP would get 26%, the Greens would receive 7% and other parties would receive 6%.

Table 4 shows the seats won by the parties under the actual FPTP election and our estimate of how seats would be distributed under PR using our sample. This is the most extreme comparison that can be made between electoral systems and also the most interesting. In the past, understanding how election outcomes would change under a different electoral system required assuming that voters would vote the same way under PR as they did in an FPTP election. We know from our study that 18% of our sample voted differently under PR and FPTP. Therefore, our results provide a more realistic picture of how a PR electoral system could impact elections in Ontario.

Table 4. Actual FPTP Seat Distribution and Estimated PR Seat Distribution

	FPTP (actual election outcome)	PR
Liberal	53	36
PC	37	31
NDP	17	31
Green	0	8
Other	0	1

If the October 6 election had been in a PR system, our data indicate that the Liberals and the Progressive Conservatives would have fewer seats, to the benefit of the NDP, the Greens and another party. In terms of seat distribution, this would translate into 36 seats for the Liberals, 31 for the Progressive Conservatives, 31 for the NDP, and 8 for the Greens.

The researchers hope that the Three Ontario Votes project has encouraged Ontarians to learn more about different electoral systems and to think about how their voting choices might differ under each. The project was conducted by political scientists from The University of Western Ontario, Carleton University, the University of Montreal and McGill University. It is part of the Making Electoral Democracy Work project that is examining elections and voters in five western democracies and is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The Three Ontario Votes team would like to thank all those who visited the site and cast their votes, and recognize the hard work of Maxime Héroux-Legault, who oversaw the project from inception to results and provided generous assistance at every stage; Ekrem Karakoc for his excellent research assistance; and Dr. Elisabeth Gidengil, for providing financial support through the Centre for the Study of Democratic Citizenship at McGill University.

For more information, please contact Prof. Laura Stephenson at The University of Western Ontario (lstephe8@uwo.ca).