



Government
of Canada

Gouvernement
du Canada

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Democracy in Canada

Have a question about Canadian democracy? This section will help you learn more about Canada's democratic institutions, how they function and why. It will also provide links to documents central to Canada's democracy such as the *Constitution* and the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. You may also follow links to longer, more detailed education resources.

- [How Parliament works](#)
- [How you vote](#)
- [How you are represented](#)

How Parliament works

Our system of government is a constitutional monarchy and a parliamentary democracy. Canada's Parliament consists of three parts: the King, represented by the governor general; the Senate; and the House of Commons.

About the House of Commons

The House of Commons plays an important role in Canada's system of government: it debates issues, votes on the passage of laws and ensures the Government is held accountable.

Members of Parliament (MPs) sit in the House of Commons to represent their local communities, known as electoral districts, also commonly referred to as constituencies or ridings.

Canadian MPs almost always or typically belong to a political party:

- Political parties help Canadians understand the views of local candidates and their elected MP by presenting voters with a set of priorities the political party will pursue, known as a “platform”.
- Platforms can indicate what Governments will do when they are in power, for example, what types of laws they will introduce and how they will handle certain issues.
- Canadian MPs who do not have a political affiliation are referred to as independents.

In Canada’s system, the Prime Minister and Cabinet sit in the House of Commons:

- This allows MPs to question the Prime Minister and Government ministers directly in the House of Commons on behalf of Canadians.
- To stay in power, the Government must have the support of a majority of MPs, also known as having the “confidence” of the House of Commons.

About the Senate

The Senate’s fundamental role is to be a complementary legislative body to the elected House of Commons in providing sober second thought. In that role, the Senate acts essentially as a reviewing chamber on proposed bills before they are passed.

The Senate also has a fundamental role to play as a chamber for the representation of regional interests. The Senate has also become an important institution for the representation of minority interests and groups who may be underrepresented in the elected chamber (such as Indigenous peoples, minority language and ethnic groups, and women).

The Canadian Constitution provides that the Senate has 105 appointed members divided among provinces and territories. The power to appoint Senators rests with the Governor General. By constitutional convention, the Governor General's power is exercised on the advice of the Prime Minister.

Recently, an open application process was established to allow Canadians to apply for appointment to the Senate. The Independent Advisory Board for Senate Appointments assesses applications based on public, merit-based criteria, in order to identify Canadians who would make a significant contribution to the work of the Senate. The Independent Advisory Board for Senate Appointments provides a short-list of five names for each vacancy to the Prime Minister for his consideration, in accordance with their Terms of Reference. Information about the role of the Independent Advisory Board for Senate Appointments can be found on their website.

About the Governor General

His Majesty Charles III is King of Canada and Head of State. The Governor General is the representative of the King in Canada. The Canadian Constitution places executive power in the King. However, in practice this power is exercised by the Prime Minister and his ministers.

The Governor General daily and fully exercises the duties of the Head of State, not only in Canada, but also abroad. The Governor General acts on the advice of the Prime Minister and the government, but has the right to

advise, to encourage and to warn. One of the Governor General's most important responsibilities is to ensure that Canada always has a Prime Minister and a government in place that has the confidence of Parliament.

About Constitutional Conventions

Conventions are rules of the Constitution; however, they are not enforced by the courts because they are not laws. For example, most of the rules of responsible government are to be found through constitutional conventions rather than the written Constitution. Conventions also limit the Governor General's powers. As another example, the Governor General must appoint as Prime Minister a party leader who is certain or likely to command a majority in the legislature.

About the Division of Powers between federal and provincial governments

There are three levels of government in Canada:

- federal;
- provincial or territorial; and
- municipal.

Each level has different areas of responsibility, which can be identified based on geography and types of services. The federal government creates laws and manages programs and services that tend to affect the whole country; the provincial and territorial governments have powers to make decisions relating to areas of law that affect their province or territory directly; and the municipal governments are responsible for establishing by-laws and services that are administered in a specific city, town or village. Both the federal and provincial and territorial areas of responsibility are listed in the Constitution Act, 1867.

For more information, see:

- the Library of Parliament's [How Parliament Works](#) and
- the [Constitution Act, 1867 to 1982](#), including the [Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#).

How you vote

Under Canada's voting system:

- there are 338 ridings in Canada;
- every riding has one Member of Parliament (MP); and
- voting is voluntary.

When Canadians go to vote:

- You vote for your local MP by selecting one candidate on the ballot.
- While candidates may be a member of a political party, you don't vote directly for the political party, but rather for the individual candidate.
- You also don't vote directly for the Prime Minister.

For more information:

- on elections and how they work, see [Canada's election process](#) for civic education information on Canada's elections;
- on the evolution of Canada's electoral system, see Elections Canada's [A History of the Vote in Canada](#);
- about your riding, including your MP, see Elections Canada's [Voter Information Service](#).

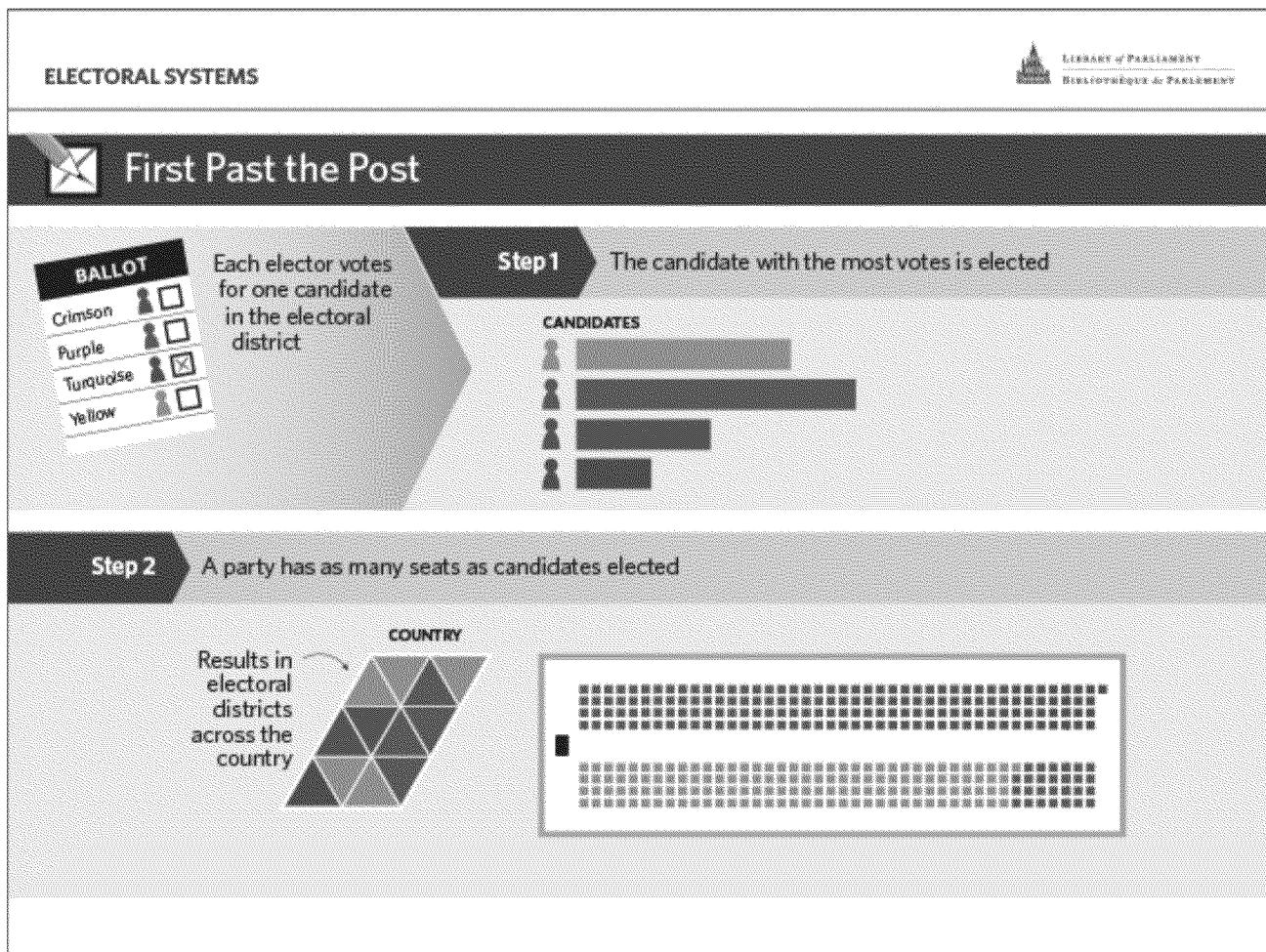
How you are represented

Elections and Government formation

The candidate who gets the most votes in your electoral district wins. The winning candidate goes to represent you in the House of Commons. This is what we call the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) system.

The political party that wins the most seats in the House of Commons usually forms the Government:

- The leader of that political party becomes the Prime Minister.
- If the political party has more than half of the seats in the House of Commons, we call this a majority government.



Source: Library of Parliament. For more information, see the [Library of Parliament](#) website.

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Elections usually happen every four years, unless a majority of Members of Parliament (MP) in the House of Commons determine they no longer want to support the Government on a matter of “confidence”.

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