REFORMING THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM IN ALBERTA: THE CASE FOR DUAL-
MEMBER MIXED PROPORTIONAL

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The Ethics and Accountability Committee has, among other tasks, been ordered to review the *Election Act*. As a strong advocate for improving the democratic integrity of voting systems, this review makes me optimistic that we can have a discussion about reforming our electoral system. The last eight elections in our province make it clear that such a discussion is desperately needed. Five of these elections, including the last two, resulted in one party obtaining more than 50% of the seats with less than a majority of the vote. The last election, along with the 1989 election, resulted in the third place party receiving official opposition status. A majority of voters in the most recent election – 54% – didn't contribute to electing a candidate. Stated differently, 54% of the votes cast in the last election were wasted. Furthermore, the last twenty-five years have been characterized by unjustifiably small oppositions, thereby reducing their ability to hold the government of the day to account. The democratic failings evident in past election results are a product of our Single-Member Plurality (SMP) electoral system. Replacing SMP with a proportional electoral system would correct these and other shortcomings. However, while reaching the conclusion that SMP is inadequate in a modern democracy is fairly straightforward, determining the sort of proportional system that should replace it is more complicated. It is on this more difficult question that the remainder of this submission will focus.

Two years ago, I received funding from the University of Alberta's Undergraduate Research Initiative to develop a new electoral system that would address the shortcomings of SMP while satisfying Canada's unique needs. My research on the history of electoral reform in Canada led me to make two important conclusions. First, Canadians had been presented with a false choice between two systems offering different benefits, Single Transferable Vote (STV) and Mixed Member Proportional (MMP). Second, the electoral systems Canadians had been asked to consider were significantly different from SMP in terms of the voters' experience and the manner in which voters would be represented. These conclusions guided me in the development of a new proportional electoral system called Dual-Member Mixed Proportional, or DMP for short.

DMP retains local representation, achieves proportionality, allows for the same nomination process currently used by parties, and, from the voters' perspective, looks nearly identical to SMP. It works by creating two-member districts where the first candidate is elected by plurality (this ensures that the first place candidate always wins a seat) and the second candidate is elected by a process that ensures proportionality of the results.[1] More specifically, proportionality is achieved by using the provincial voting results to determine the number of seats each party deserves and the individual district results to determine where each party will win its seats. As a result, DMP simultaneously respects the principles of provincial and local accountability.

By electing all candidates within dual-member districts, two complaints made against proportional systems like MMP are eliminated: that mixed systems create two tiers of representatives and that proportional systems require the use of long party lists which hinder the electorate's ability to hold candidates accountable. Furthermore, unlike MMP where independents are unable to win the top-up seats, DMP places no seats off limits to independent candidates. Therefore, despite the fact that DMP is a proportional system that views parties as playing a key role in a democracy, it allows the electorate to completely reject this view by choosing to have independent candidates fill all of the seats.

Given the recent discussion of using the Alternative Vote (AV) at the federal level, it is worth giving a brief comparison of AV and DMP. One of the most important ways DMP differs from AV is that it always, and only, considers the first choice preferences of voters. AV, on the other hand, creates a new type of inequality between voters. While some would get the privilege of electing their preferred candidate, many voters would have to settle for one of their lower ranked candidates. Worse still, some wouldn't see their vote count at all. As a result, AV would produce the same poor quality results that have come to be expected from SMP.

I will now turn to how DMP would have improved the outcome of the 2015 Alberta election in more concrete terms. Using voting data from last May, a simulation of the last election under DMP was produced, the results of which are displayed in the figures and table on pages 5 through 9.[2] This

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[1] A thorough explanation of this process is contained in the report sent to the Committee. Rather than repeat that explanation here, I ask that the Committee look to that report, specifically sections 6.1 to 6.3 (pages 20-31).
[2] The table on page 9 shows precisely where each party would have won its seats.

simulation used a district threshold of 5% and a plurality factor of 7%.[3] It also assumed that each single-member district was a two-member district. Of course, if DMP is used in Alberta in the future, the number of districts would likely decrease so that the number of seats would not increase. However, the effect of reducing the number of districts on the simulation results would not be meaningful.

The first figure displays the distribution of the popular vote and the distribution of seats under DMP and SMP. The two most jarring discrepancies between the popular vote and the election outcome under SMP are the 21 percentage point over-representation of the NDP and the 17 percentage point under-representation of the PCP. The outcome of the election would have been very different with DMP. Figure 1 shows that the Legislature would have closely mirrored the popular vote had DMP been used to determine the election outcome. Furthermore, Figure 2 reveals that 91% of the elected candidates under DMP would have placed first or second in their districts. In other words, 91% of the seats would have been assigned to the same candidates as under a plurality formula.

This last point is worth more discussion. At first glance, some object to a third place candidate being elected over one that placed second. However, such an objection is unwarranted for two reasons. First, Figure 3 demonstrates that simply moving to a two-member district plurality system would not have corrected the shortcomings of SMP. The 9% of seats that would have been assigned to different candidates under DMP than under a two-member district plurality system is what would have allowed DMP to correct plurality's flaws. Second, such candidates would be elected because their party received sufficient support across the province to merit representation in the Legislature. DMP requires candidates to have a mandate based on both the provincial and district votes. When a second place candidate belongs to a party that doesn't have a mandate for more seats based on the provincial vote, the candidate is denied the seat and it is given to the next best performing candidate whose party has such a provincial mandate.

Figures 4 and 5 reveal yet another benefit of using DMP. As Figure 4 shows, 77% of the districts would have been represented by two different parties. This would improve how Albertans are represented by increasing the number of voters in each district who are represented by a party they support. Moreover, Figure 5 shows that parties would see the regional diversity of their caucuses

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[3] For an explanation of thresholds and the plurality factor, see DMPForCanada.wordpress.com.

increase. For example, the NDP, PCP, and WRP would have obtained representation in approximately 70%, 55%, and 43% of Alberta's districts, respectively. This would have been an 8, 44, and 19 percentage point improvement for these parties over the result obtained with SMP, respectively.

Finally, figures 6, 7, and 8 demonstrate that DMP would also improve Alberta's election results on a regional basis. While the Edmonton region would have only experienced a minor improvement in its representation, the Rest of Alberta and Calgary regions would have seen their results approach proportionality.

Replacing SMP with Dual-Member Mixed Proportional would ensure that the choices of Alberta voters are accurately reflected in the Legislature. This would be accomplished by making sure that every vote counts and that each vote is treated equally. Additionally, DMP would distribute each party's seats more evenly across the province, ensuring better regional representation within party caucuses. Lastly, it would improve how Albertan's are represented at the local level by electing candidates from two different parties in a majority of districts.

One of the most fundamental and important processes in our democracy is how the votes of Albertans are translated into representation in our Legislature. Unfortunately, it is a process that has been taken for granted. Consequently, SMP has been assumed to be legitimate simply because of its longstanding use. This submission has demonstrated that the status quo does not meet an acceptable democratic threshold and has put forward a more democratically sound alternative. At a minimum, I hope I have convinced the Committee that Alberta requires a new electoral system so that we can begin this important discussion.

For more information about DMP, including a simulation of the 2012 Alberta election, go to DMPForCanada.wordpress.com.
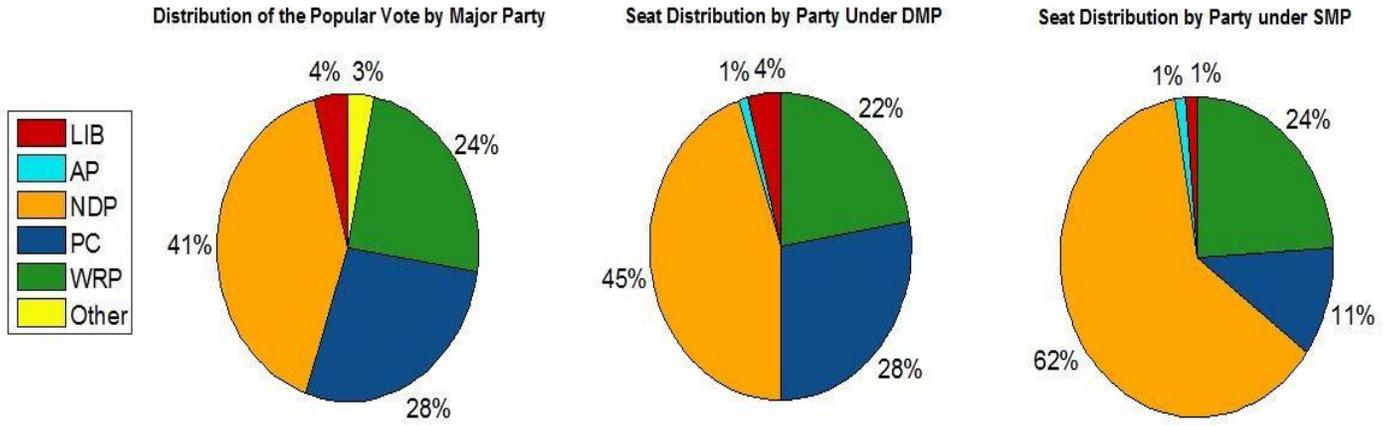
FIGURES AND TABLES

Alberta

Distribution of the Popular Vote by Major Party

LIB
AP
NDP
PC
WRP
Other

4% 3%
24%
41%
28%

Seat Distribution by Party Under DMP

1% 4%
22%
45%
28%

Seat Distribution by Party under SMP

1% 1%
24%
11%
62%

Figure 1

Seat Distribution by Candidate Placement

1
2
3
4
5

2% 2% 5%
50%
41%
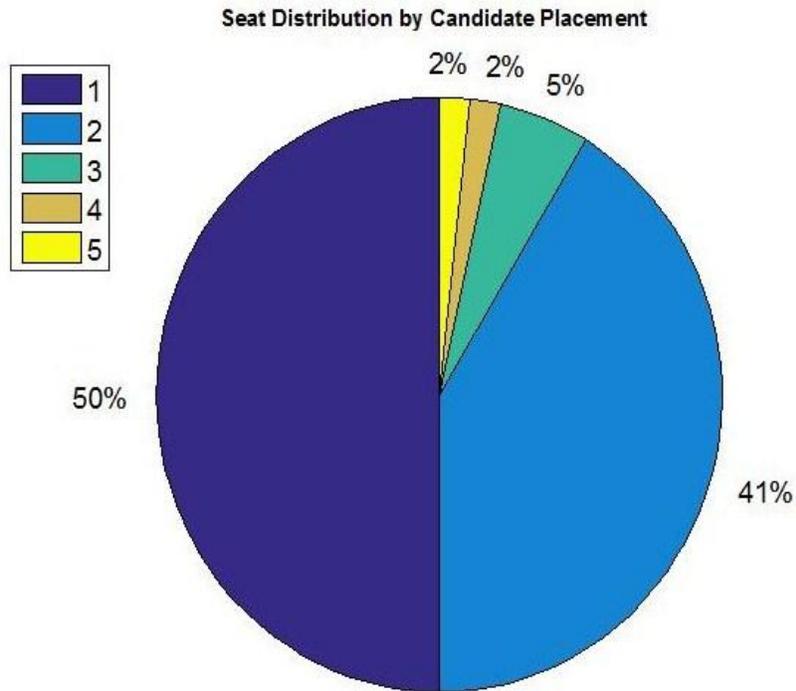
Figure 2

Seat Distribution by Party under a Two Member District Plurality System

< 1% < 1%

20%

52%

26%

LIB
AP
NDP
PC
WRP

Figure 3
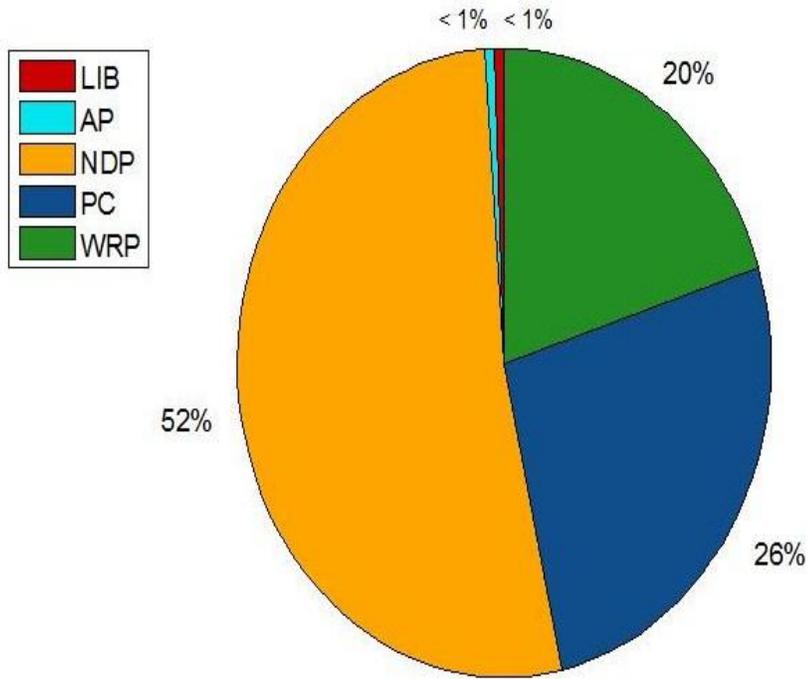
Districts With Single Party Representation vs. Districts With Dual Party Representation

23%

77%

Dual Party Representation
Single Party Representation

Figure 4

District Representation By Party
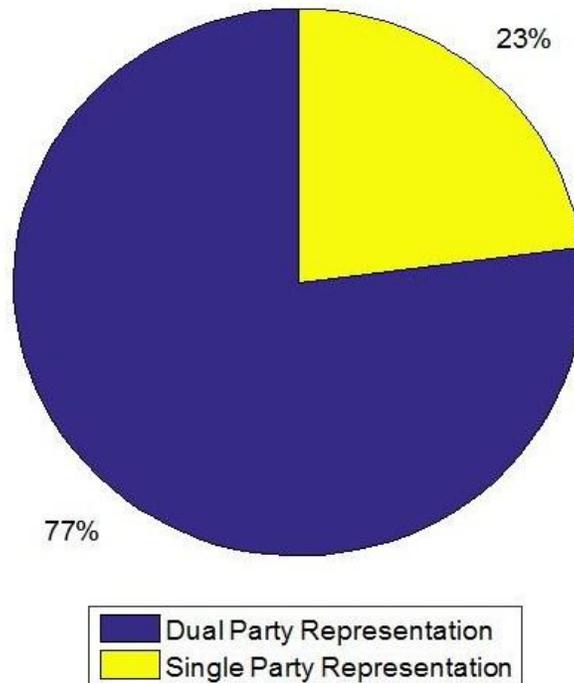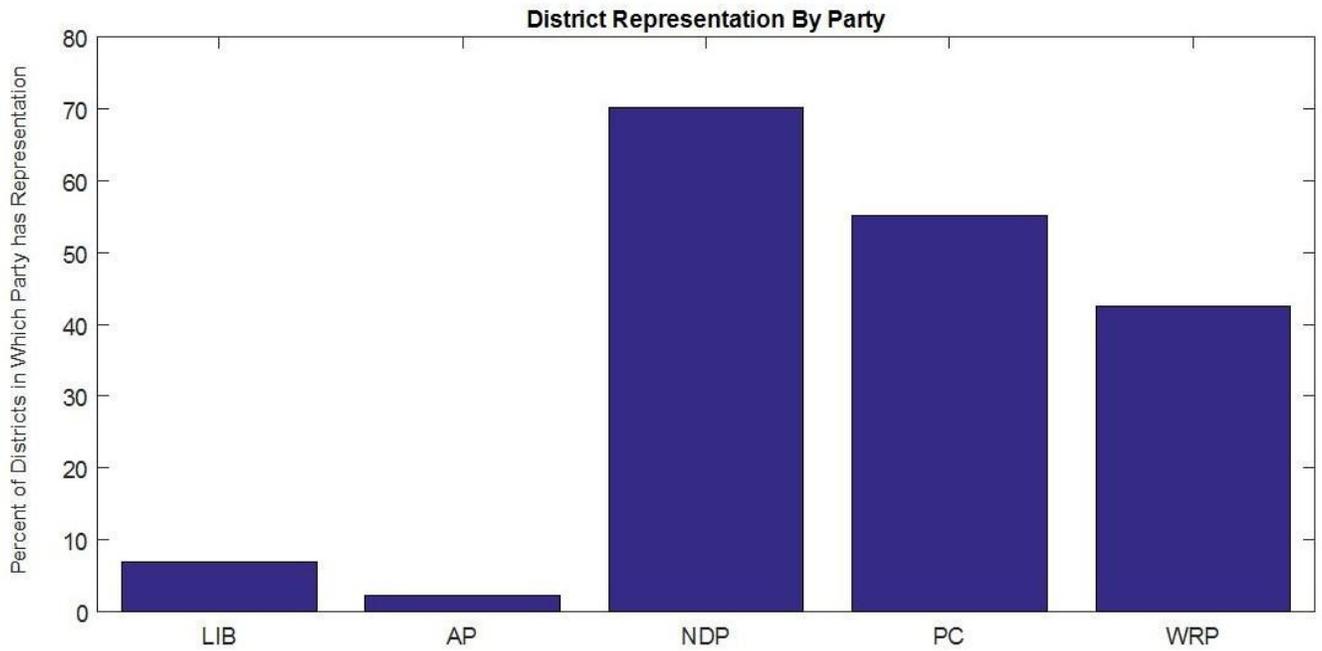
Figure 5

Calgary

Figure 6

Edmonton

Distribution of the Popular Vote by Major Party

6% 1% 8%
20%
65%

LIB
NDP
PC
WRP
Other

Seat Distribution by Party Under DMP

8% 5%
87%

Seat Distribution by Party Under SMP

100%

Figure 7

Rest of Alberta

Distribution of the Popular Vote by Major Party

5%
33%
33%
29%

LIB
AP
NDP
PC
WRP
Other

Seat Distribution by Party Under DMP

1% 1%
30%
36%
31%

Seat Distribution by Party under SMP

47%
49%
5%
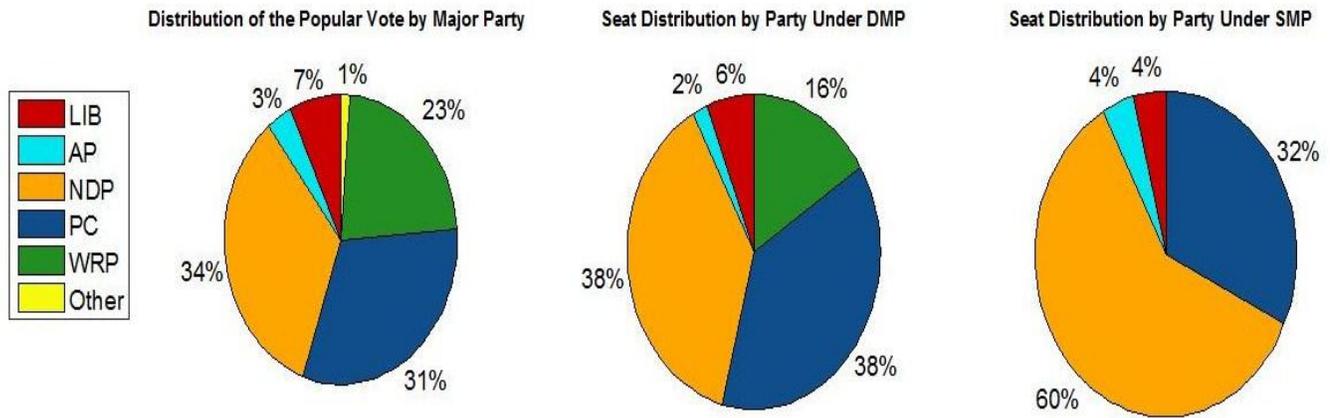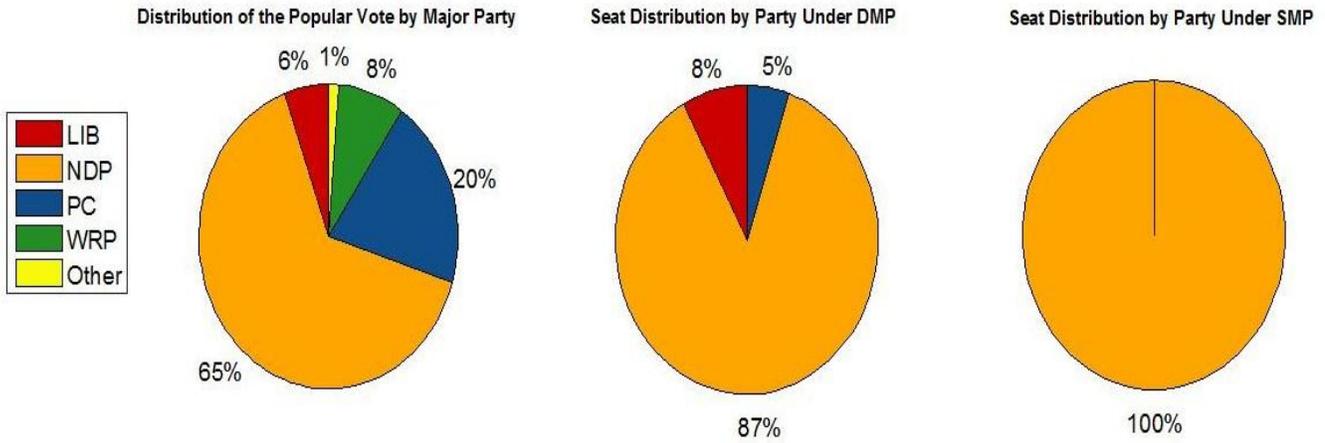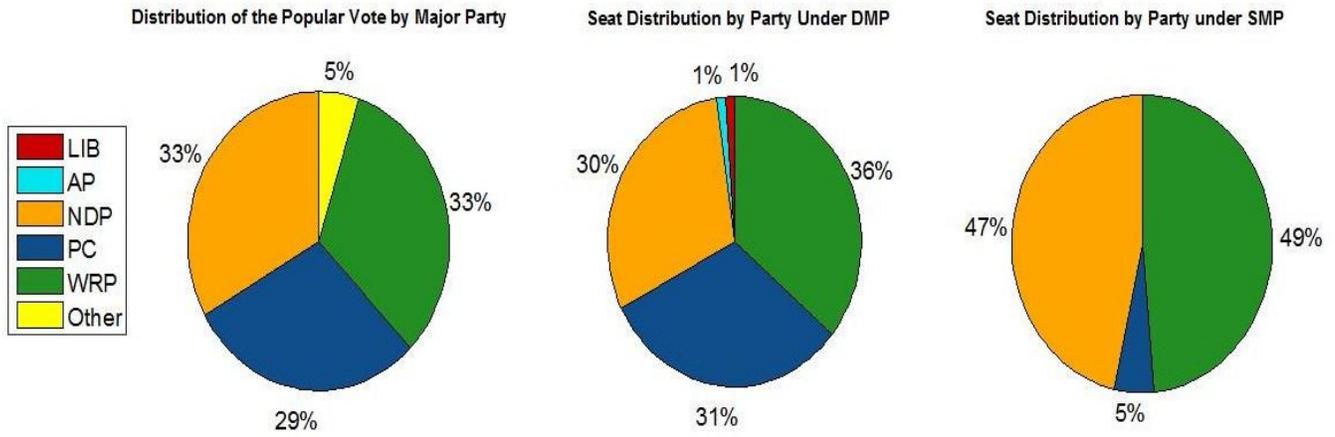
Figure 8

District Results of the 2015 Alberta Election Under DMP			
District #	Winner of First Seat	Winner of Second Seat	Place of Second Seat Winner
1001	'NDP'	'WRP'	2
1002	'NDP'	'WRP'	2
2003	'NDP'	'WRP'	2
2004	'NDP'	'PC'	2
2005	'NDP'	'PC'	2
2006	'NDP'	'PC'	2
2007	'NDP'	'LIB'	5
2008	'NDP'	'PC'	2
2009	'AP'	'PC'	2
2010	'PC'	'WRP'	3
2011	'PC'	'NDP'	2
2012	'NDP'	'NDP'	2
2013	'NDP'	'PC'	2
2014	'PC'	'NDP'	2
2015	'NDP'	'PC'	2
2016	'PC'	'WRP'	3
2017	'NDP'	'PC'	2
2018	'PC'	'WRP'	3
2019	'NDP'	'WRP'	2
2020	'NDP'	'WRP'	2
2021	'LIB'	'LIB'	4
2022	'PC'	'WRP'	3
2023	'NDP'	'PC'	2
2024	'NDP'	'PC'	2
2025	'PC'	'WRP'	3
2026	'NDP'	'PC'	2
2027	'PC'	'NDP'	2
3028	'NDP'	'NDP'	2
3029	'NDP'	'NDP'	2
3030	'NDP'	'NDP'	2
3031	'NDP'	'LIB'	3
3032	'NDP'	'NDP'	2
3033	'NDP'	'NDP'	2
3034	'NDP'	'NDP'	2
3035	'NDP'	'NDP'	2
3036	'NDP'	'NDP'	2
3037	'NDP'	'NDP'	2
3038	'NDP'	'NDP'	2
3039	'NDP'	'LIB'	5
3040	'NDP'	'LIB'	4
3041	'NDP'	'NDP'	2
3042	'NDP'	'NDP'	2
3043	'NDP'	'NDP'	2
3044	'NDP'	'PC'	2
3045	'NDP'	'NDP'	2
3046	'NDP'	'PC'	2
1047	'WRP'	'PC'	3
1048	'NDP'	'PC'	2
1049	'NDP'	'WRP'	2
1050	'WRP'	'NDP'	2
1051	'WRP'	'PC'	2
1052	'WRP'	'PC'	2
1053	'WRP'	'PC'	2
1054	'WRP'	'PC'	2
1055	'WRP'	'WRP'	2
1056	'WRP'	'PC'	2
1057	'WRP'	'PC'	2
1058	'WRP'	'NDP'	2
1059	'WRP'	'NDP'	2
1060	'NDP'	'PC'	2
1061	'WRP'	'PC'	3
1062	'PC'	'AP'	5
1063	'WRP'	'PC'	2
1064	'WRP'	'PC'	2
1065	'WRP'	'NDP'	2
1066	'WRP'	'PC'	3
1067	'NDP'	'WRP'	2
1068	'NDP'	'PC'	2
1069	'NDP'	'NDP'	2
1070	'WRP'	'PC'	2
1071	'WRP'	'PC'	2
1072	'NDP'	'WRP'	2
1073	'WRP'	'WRP'	2
1074	'NDP'	'PC'	2
1075	'NDP'	'LIB'	4
1076	'NDP'	'PC'	2
1077	'WRP'	'PC'	2
1078	'NDP'	'NDP'	2
1079	'NDP'	'PC'	2
1080	'NDP'	'PC'	2
1081	'NDP'	'WRP'	2
1082	'NDP'	'PC'	2
1083	'WRP'	'PC'	2
1084	'PC'	'WRP'	2
1085	'NDP'	'PC'	2
1086	'NDP'	'PC'	2
1087	'NDP'	'WRP'	2