



Canadians choose their federal governments through general elections for the House of Commons, the principal law-making body in the country.

The Canadian Constitution requires the election of a new House of Commons at least once every five years. This is called a federal general election to distinguish it from the many other elections held in Canada.

At the next federal general election, 295 legislators, representing the same number of electoral districts, or constituencies, will be chosen to sit in the House of Commons. They are called Members of Parliament or M.Ps. The leader of the party with the most seats becomes prime minister and forms a government, which thereafter remains answerable to the House for its policies and actions.

Canada uses a simple plurality system to elect its legislators. This is sometimes called the 'first-past-the-post' system. It means that the candidate who obtains the greatest number of votes in the constituency is elected to represent it in the House of Commons.

Under Canadian law, representation in the House of Commons must be reviewed at ten-year intervals, after each decennial census. The review normally results in the redrawing of a number of electoral boundaries. This work is carried out by electoral boundaries commissions appointed in each of the ten provinces and in the Northwest Territories.

The voting population of electoral districts varies from one to another but averages some 60 000.

The prime minister chooses 30 or more individuals from his party to serve with him as ministers in the Cabinet. Though one or two may be members of the non-elective Upper House, the Senate, all are usually members of the House of Commons or are elected to that House after their appointment.

The Cabinet, consisting of the prime minister and the other ministers, discharges the executive functions of government. Individual members administer different government departments such as finance, agriculture, external affairs and justice. In addition, there are sometimes one or more Cabinet members known as ministers without portfolio, who are not in charge of departments but who may be assigned by the prime minister to carry out specific executive functions within departments.