



GUEST EDITORIAL

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FIRST-PAST-THE-POST IS A BARRIER TO FIXING OUR LONG-TERM CARE SYSTEM

The care options seniors need as they age are painfully at odds with what is currently on offer in Ontario's long-term care system.

It's hard to overstate our collective aversion to being looked after in a nursing home:

- 92% of females and 93% of males over age 65 [don't want](#) to end up in Ontario's long-term care homes.
- 48% of those over age 55 agree that they actually "[dread](#)" the thought of themselves or a loved one having to move into long-term care.
- 59% say they will **do anything they can** to avoid themselves or their loved ones ending up there.

During the darkest days of COVID-19, the media shone a spotlight onto the agonizing stories of individuals trapped in our long-term care institutions and the families valiantly advocating for their loved ones.

Their tragic stories shocked and horrified the public.

Profound changes which would enable us to "build back better," to create a fairer, more equal, and just society, seemed urgent and—at long last—politically possible.

Alas, the moment was short-lived.

Instead of fixing the problems that were uncovered during the pandemic and providing better options, our government in Ontario is aiming to [warehouse](#) 30,000 more seniors in the very institutions that most of us are desperate to avoid.

Evidence is abundant, but political will is in short supply

Long-term care models that help people "age in place" are not only possible, they're practical and being used successfully in other parts of the world.

The approach to long-term care in Denmark, to choose just one example, provides a stark contrast to Ontario:

Long-term care in Denmark

Guiding principles	Home care	Residential care
<p>Deinstitutionalizing started in the 1970's.</p> <p>There is a strong focus on independent living, community based care, and quality of life.</p>	<p>Free or means-tested services are available around the clock.</p> <p>This includes help with daily living & personal care.</p> <p>Reablement programs aim to help seniors regain and maintain the ability to live independently.</p>	<p>Hospital-like homes with multiple beds per room were legally banned in 1984.</p> <p>Five different types of residential care are offered, and people choose based on their needs and preferences.</p> <p>Nursing home residents have their own private living spaces. They are considered tenants and are offered services.</p>

Source: World Health Organization, "Denmark: Country case study on the integrated delivery of long-term care".

Winner-take-all voting is shutting voters out

After decades of advocacy, expert reports, model examples and public opinion polls, it's reasonable to ask:

Why can't we get politicians to listen?

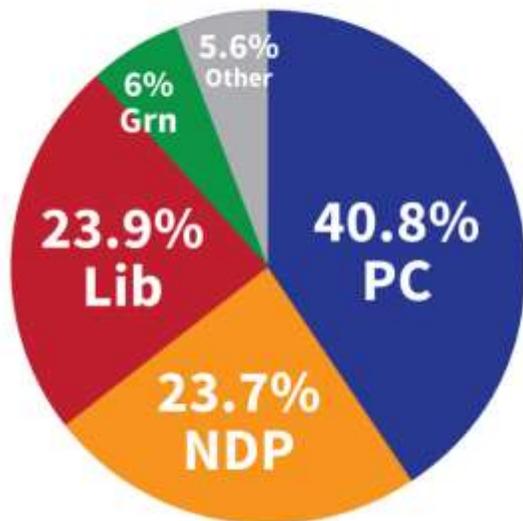
While there's no magic bullet, one thing that most of the countries with the best long-term care systems have in common is: **none of them use first-past-the-post.**

Our voting system gives us "majority" governments that most of us voted against. In Ontario's 2022 election, the Progressive Conservatives received 40.5% of the popular vote (the support of [18% of eligible voters](#)). Mindbogglingly, the system transformed this into a landslide "majority".

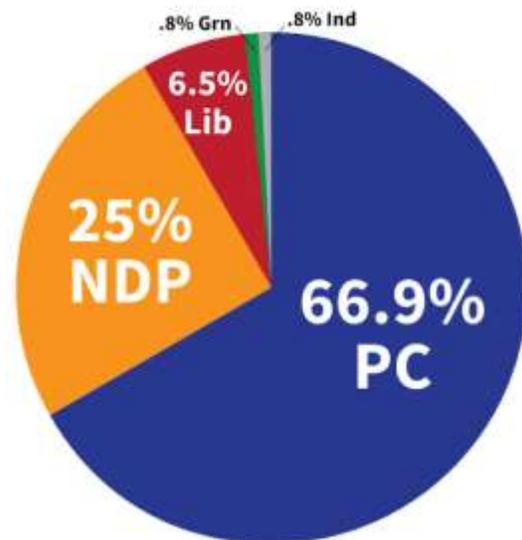
Doug Ford's party now has 100% of the power to make the decisions about long-term care for another four years.

Ontario votes 2022

**How we voted
(popular vote)**



**What we got
(seats)**



This kind of result isn't an anomaly. Kathleen Wynne's last Liberal "majority" government had the support of a mere 38.7% of voters.

With a first-past-the-post voting system, most voters are unable to elect anyone who truly speaks for them. Their votes just don't count.

Over time, the effects of the voting system on long-term policy outcomes can be profound.

Winner-take-all voting manufactures "majority" governments that simply don't need to listen to anyone except the minority of people who got them elected.

As Seniors for Social Action noted, those responsible are simply "[unavailable](#)".

Winner-take-all voting systems are also a dream scenario for industry lobbyists.

It's a lot easier to get those in the backroom of one party to agree to legislate what you want than to openly convince three different parties who are working together in a coalition.

Short-term politics, short-term fixes

Winner-take-all systems keep the focus on band-aid solutions. They keep activists chained to a cycle of demanding urgent action on short-term crises.

Advocacy groups, whose resources are often stretched thin on many fronts, focus on mobilizing support and media attention to stop the worst immediate outcomes.

For example, as the seventh wave of COVID sweeps nursing homes and summer temperatures soar, we hear urgent calls for more vaccines and air conditioning units.

As important as these things are, we hear far too little in the media about campaigns pressuring the government to reduce the numbers of seniors placed in institutions in the first place.

Policy lurch creates cycles of hope and despair

When it comes to tackling the long-term challenge of our time, winner-take-all voting makes it hard to plan ahead and even harder to make sustainable progress.

Massive policy lurches can occur following an election. A very small swing in the popular vote can lead to a radically different government and a 180-degree reversal in policy.

A new 39% “majority” often spends their first 100 days cancelling and dismantling the programs of the previous government.

Hard-won progress achieved by advocates during the reign of one party can be flushed down the toilet when a different party takes power.

For advocates who are dedicated to working for long-term, transformational change and real alternatives to institutional care, winner-take-all voting puts them at the mercy of electoral cycles.

Proportional representation empowers voters and creates more cooperative, forward-thinking politics

Most of the countries that prioritize independence and home care—Denmark, Finland, Belgium, Germany, and Sweden, for example—elect their governments using proportional representation (PR).

Proportional representation simply means that if 40% of voters support Party A, those voters will elect about 40% of the MPPs.

Countries with proportional representation have better [overall population health](#), and were shown to have lower death rates during the first wave of COVID-19.

If Ontarians want a stronger voice over the decisions that affect our lives, adopting proportional representation is a crucial piece of the puzzle.

PR means that you will almost certainly have an MPP who shares your political point of view. No more being “represented” by an MPP who doesn’t share your values.

Equally important, proportional representation produces more **cooperative politics**.

With PR, no single party with less than 50% of the vote will ever have a monopoly on power.

In Denmark, for example, which leads the world on policies that enable aging in place, no single party has had all the decision-making power since 1909.

More parties—and the citizens they represent—have a say in policy development. Yet there’s no doubt that governments in Denmark get things done.

Finland is another example of cooperative politics at work. In contrast to Ontario’s single-party false majority, Finland’s current government is a five-party coalition, led entirely by women.



Finland’s government is in the process of following Denmark’s lead, passing [legislation](#) that will **eliminate** nursing homes, phasing out long-term institutional care by 2027.

While Finland still lags behind Denmark in its transition to home- and community-based care, [only 1%](#) of people over the age of 75 in Finland are now living in what they call institutional care (nursing homes).

In Canada, [one in three](#) seniors 85+ are institutionalized.

The contrast couldn't be clearer:

Successive false majority governments in Ontario are delivering more of the kind of “care” that most Canadians will do anything to avoid.

Cooperative governments in Denmark and Finland are delivering options seniors themselves want—and the majority of voters support.

Policy built to last

With proportional representation, parties are forced to learn to work together and take each other's views into account. The collaboration between parties is much deeper than it will ever be with first-past-the-post.

In Denmark in 2020, for example, [nine parties](#) worked together to pass the strongest climate law in the world.

Policies that were built with broad support in the first place are more likely to last.

With proportional representation, even when governments change from left-leaning to right-leaning, the swings in policy tend to be less extreme because usually at least one major coalition partner continues in government.

Some of the most successful policies and programs have been created—and maintained—through cooperative governments.

When it comes to outcomes on health, climate, and democracy, the [evidence](#) for proportional representation speaks for itself.

Electoral reform could help drive action on long-term care in Ontario

Strong public support already exists for an overhaul of Ontario's long-term care system.

We all want a system that offers more choice and control as we age: a system that values seniors as part of their communities.

With determination and ingenuity, community organizations in Canada are demonstrating what's possible, such as the new multi-generational, [supportive housing complex](#) being built in Scarborough.

The Ontario government could ensure that these kinds of options are available for all seniors in Ontario.

Yet even after the shocking failings in long-term care were exposed during the pandemic, [less than one third](#) of Canadians expect to see significant change in the system over the next ten years.

When it comes to the biggest challenges ahead, our winner-take-all political system has conditioned us all to expect less.

It's time to push hard for a democratic system in Canada that helps to ensure that we can meet the challenges ahead. A system that gives everyone a voice in their future.

Seniors—and all Canadians—deserve it.

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