

MakeEveryVOTERCount

Submission to British Columbia's Attorney General



Make Every VOTER Count

Make Every Voter Count (MEVC) is a registered, non-profit society in British Columbia that was jointly founded by Fair Voting BC and Fair Vote Canada-BC with the purpose of supporting efforts to introduce proportional voting to British Columbia.

Over the past five months, MEVC has hosted deliberative conversations with pro-electoral reform individuals and organizations across the province to develop this submission to B.C.'s Attorney General in response to his ministry's request for public input on the process for the upcoming referendum on proportional representation.

Summary of Recommendations

Make Every Voter Count recommends the following three key points:

- 1. Ballot Question:** The ballot should include a specific question requesting a public mandate to adopt proportional voting that is linked to a transparent public process to choose a specific proportional system.
- 2. Timing of Referendum:** The referendum campaign should not overlap with the fall municipal election campaigns.
- 3. Campaign Finance and Third-Party Advertising Regulations:** The referendum should be subject to regulations that limit the influence of big money.

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Detailed Recommendations

1. Ballot Question

Rationale: To address calls for a clear question that have been expressed from across the political spectrum and ensure strong public input into which system will be chosen.

Background: *Bill 6* authorizes the conduct of a referendum on electoral reform and allows for asking one or more questions in the referendum. The backgrounder issued by the government clarified that *Bill 6* would allow for a question that offers more than two possible responses and would allow voters to respond using a ranked ballot.

Recommendation: The ballot should include a specific question requesting a public mandate to adopt proportional voting that is linked to a transparent public process to choose a specific proportional system.

To ensure that the referendum question be perceived as fair and direct as possible, and focused on the principles underlying the ultimate choice of a specific voting system, we recommend that the referendum question take the form of a request that voters express support either for the province's plan to shift our voting system to proportional representation or for continuing to use the existing single member plurality, or first-past-the-post system.

In order to provide reassurance to the public that the system ultimately chosen would best serve the public as a whole, rather than primarily partisan interests, we recommend that this question should include a preamble. This preamble should be explicitly printed on the ballot, and commit the province to delegate to Elections BC, or a similar independent entity, responsibility for an arms-length, post-referendum system selection process that would involve significant public input and engagement.

This preamble should further specify that any system selected in this process must satisfy certain key criteria that the public at large regards as crucial in an acceptable proportional voting system (e.g. proportionality, preservation of local regional representation, no reduction of seats in any region of the province, the ability to vote directly for specific candidates, etc.) and to rule out system options that few if any in B.C. are advocating (e.g. closed lists, province-wide lists, non-proportional systems, significant expansion of the legislature, etc.)

To provide further reassurance that the selected system can be refined in the future to ensure that it is working in the public interest, the question preamble should also specify that the selected system would be subject to a mandatory review process led by Elections BC and a confirmatory referendum after a minimum of two election cycles under the new system.

2. Timing of Referendum

Rationale: To avoid conflict with the fall municipal election campaigns

Recommendation: Do not overlap referendum balloting period with the fall municipal election campaigns.

The period during which the mail-in ballots are available to the public should not overlap with the campaign period for the fall's municipal elections – September 22 to October 20. This means either that the referendum close date should be prior to September 22 or the mailing-out of the ballots should take place shortly after October 20.

3. Campaign Finance and Third-Party Advertising Regulations

Rationale: To limit big money influence on either side of referendum question, while at the same time providing an opportunity for a fulsome public debate on the issues.

Recommendation: Adopt regulations that limit the influence of ‘big money’.

In calling a referendum on the voting system, the province needs to recognize that this debate should belong primarily to the people of British Columbia and not to those with vested or special interests. It should therefore assume responsibility for ensuring that the associated regulations promote public debate that serves the broad public interest. The following recommendations represent what we feel should be the minimum set of regulations governing campaign finance and third-party advertising for the referendum to achieve that aim:

- a) Campaign finance and third-party advertising regulations should take effect the same day the legislature adopts the referendum question(s).
- b) The Attorney General should recognize one official proponent group and one official opponent group for the purposes of mounting campaigns during the referendum campaign period.
- c) The province should promptly provide a minimum of \$500,000 each to both the proponent and opponent organizations to initiate their campaigns, forgoing provincial political tax credits for campaign donations, as has been the practise in the past two electoral reform referenda. It takes time to organize a campaign, and proponent and opponent organizations are not like parties in terms of having established infrastructure, nor will they formally exist beyond the referendum date, so they require funding to have the greatest opportunity to immediately and effectively plan and execute a campaign that reaches the public.
- d) Proponent and opponent groups should be subject to spending limits of no more than \$0.50 per registered elector.

- e) Donations to the proponent and opponent campaigns should be subject to the same regulations in force for electoral organizations during a provincial election. Make Every Voter Count would also recommend smaller limits be considered to motivate proponents and opponents to engage with the general public to the greatest extent possible (e.g., Quebec imposes a contribution limit of \$100).
- f) Proponent and opponent campaign financial disclosures will be subject to the same regulations in force for electoral organizations during a provincial election.
- g) Third-party advertisers should, at a minimum, be subject during the campaign period to the existing regulations in force for non-electoral organizations during a provincial election.
- h) Provincial political parties, as private entities with a clear vested interest in the referendum question, should not be permitted to dominate the campaign discourse. We therefore recommend that political parties should be subject to either:
 - i) third party advertising regulations that apply to other organizations who participate in the referendum; or
 - ii) the same regulations applied to proponent and opponent campaigns.

Who is Make Every Voter Count?

The two founding members of Make Every Voter Count – Fair Voting BC and Fair Vote Canada-BC – are non-partisan, non-profit societies that have a long history of advocating for voting and other democratic reforms both here in British Columbia and across Canada.

Established in 2001, Fair Vote Canada promotes the introduction of an element of proportional representation into elections for all levels of government and throughout civil society.

Fair Vote Canada-BC has 11,000 B.C. members and 15 active chapters across the province.

Fair Voting BC was founded in 1997 and works for fair voting systems for all elections held in BC, whether for federal, provincial, municipal legislatures, councils, or for independent organizations such as societies, unions, coops or student councils. Fair Voting BC was the officially recognized proponent in the 2009 referendum campaign.

Contact

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