

How We Vote - Leadnow's recommendations for the 2018 BC referendum on electoral reform.

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About Leadnow:

Leadnow is a non-profit national advocacy organization with a large and active community in BC. We work on campaigns in support of an open democracy, a just society, a fair economy and a healthy environment. We engage our members in online and offline actions and consultations and help them connect with decision-makers on the issues they care about.

Electoral reform has long been one of the top concerns of the Leadnow community, and has been a focus of our advocacy work on the national level for the last two years. A recent survey of our 125,000 BC members confirmed that our community is eager to see us continue to work on this issue in BC.

The Leadnow community overwhelmingly supports proportional representation, and have been consulted in the process of creating these recommendations.

Summary of recommendations

- 1. Ask voters for a mandate for change, and engage them in what that change will look like.** Voters should be asked a simple, straight forward yes/no question that will gauge the public's opinion on change. Voters should also be consulted in an additional process on what that change should look like.
- 2. Conduct a consultation process to identify which systems the public should consider.** This process should engage both the general public and experts to identify what systems the public should consider.
- 3. Provide adequate funding for robust and inclusive citizen education.** British Columbians need to be informed how, where and when to vote, as well as what they are voting on. A well-resourced, experienced third party should be empowered to educate voters about the referendum, and the options on the table.



- 4. Include in-person voting options to supplement the mail in ballot.** To ensure accessibility for voters with insecure or transient housing, in-person voting options should be provided.
- 5. Hold a confirmation referendum after 2 election cycles using the new PR voting system.** This will allow voters to feel more confident in voting for change knowing they can “try out” the new system, and vote on it again in a follow-up process.

Detailed Recommendations

1. Ask voters for a mandate for change, and engage them in what that change will look like.

Having a simple, straight forward yes/no question on the ballot will ensure the referendum is accessible to as many people as possible, and will gauge the public's opinion on change. However, having an additional process that will allow voters to weigh in on what that change should look like will also be necessary, and is key to ensuring the public is satisfied that they will decide what our new voting system will look like, not political parties or government.

New Zealand switched from first-past-the-post to mixed-member proportional in the 90s and that experience provides an interesting case study for engaging the public on upgrading their voting system, and which PR system they should choose.

They first held a non-binding referendum in 1992 which asked voters if they wanted to keep FPTP or change to a new system. Then, if they answered ‘yes’ to change, they were asked to pick between 4 systems. This referendum was followed by a binding vote between FPTP and mixed-member proportional the next year.

[Full details of the process can be found here.](#)

2. Run a public consultation process to identify which systems voters will choose between.

Having a process outside of the government or political party structures, will help ensure the public of the integrity and legitimacy of changing our voting system. A public consultation process to identify which systems voters should consider will instill greater trust in the process for change, and confidence in the ultimate system that is chosen.



A Citizens Assembly would be the gold standard for a process, but we understand that there may not be enough time and resources to run a full process similar to the one held in 2004.

A faster but still excellent option to consider is a [‘citizens jury’ model](#).

Whichever process is chosen, it should be public, deliberative, and engage both experts and citizens.

3. Provide adequate funding for robust and inclusive citizen education.

Professor Dennis Pilon’s [article about the 2005 and 2009 BC referendums](#) demonstrates that there was little awareness of the referendum or the proposed change leading up to voting day, speaking to the need for better education this time around. It also shows that the more people know, the more they support change.[1] Pilon also notes that public opinion polling shows people broadly like the idea of proportionality, but don’t connect that to the systems on offer in referendums.[2] A better informed electorate can help change that this time around.

British Columbians need to be informed how, where, and when to vote, as well as what they are voting on. A well-resourced, experienced 3rd party should be tasked with educating voters about the referendum, and the options on the table.

4. Include in-person voting options to supplement the mail in ballot.

Having *only* a mail-in option and no options to vote in person privileges people with stable housing, and could mean lower income people, students and young people are harder to engage. Given the magnitude of the housing crisis faced by many British Columbians the issue of accessibility should be taken seriously. We need to ensure that there is more than one way to participate in the referendum given the challenges associated with a mail in ballot.

Having in-person voting stations or in person ballot pick up stations could be an effective way of increasing accessibility. Measures to ensure that certain demographics are not excluded from voting will also help increase public trust that the referendum is being carried out in good faith.

5. Hold a confirmation referendum after 2 election cycles using the new PR voting system.

British Columbians could ‘try out’ the selected PR system in two election cycles after



which a 'confirmation referendum' could be held so that voters can make a final, informed decision after using the system. The confirmation referendum will aid in the legitimacy of the reform and frees people up to take a chance on change in the first referendum.

Conclusion

The referendum on Proportional Representation is an incredible opportunity to update and strengthen our democracy. Ensuring the process is set up so that the public can meaningfully engage and participate in decision making and have trust in the outcome is key. We are open to what an additional process could look like for engaging voters on which system we will ultimately move to. Some options to consider are an additional question on the original ballot that gages the public's values on voting systems, or preference of PR systems, or a second referendum process at a later date that asks voters to choose their future voting system. Whichever process is chosen, it needs to engage the public and experts, and should not be left solely in the hands of political parties or government.

For questions, contact:

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Additional resources:

Citizens' juries

- <https://www.epa.gov/international-cooperation/public-participation-guide-citizen-juries>
- <https://www.participedia.net/en/methods/citizens-jury>

[1-3] Pilon, Dennis (2010): The 2005 and 2009 Referenda on Voting System Change in British Columbia. <https://ojs.unbc.ca/index.php/cpsr/article/view/251/301>

