



How We Vote: Written Submission on B.C. Electoral Reform

Prepared by Dogwood staff, February 2018

This brief summarizes perspectives gathered from Dogwood supporters across British Columbia on their democratic priorities and preferred attributes in a new voting system, along with suggestions for a fair referendum process. The organization also encouraged individual supporters to participate in the “How We Vote” online questionnaire.

Named after B.C.’s provincial flower, Dogwood is a people-powered organization driven by a shared love of place. Headquartered in Victoria, our 20 staff and more than 800 volunteers help voters across the political spectrum take action on the urgent challenges facing our province.

Best known for our work on environmental campaigns like *No Tankers and Beyond Coal*, Dogwood also advocates for campaign finance reform, government transparency, improved public consultation and better access to voting – in short, policies that level the playing field between grassroots voters and entrenched political interests.

SURVEY SUMMARY

In January 2018, Dogwood staff wrote and circulated a survey to supporters across B.C., garnering more than 3600 responses. This is not a random sample, nor are the results demographically weighted. Instead, this is a summary of opinions from a self-selected cohort of highly engaged Dogwood volunteers and supporters.

Respondents ranked environmental protection and climate change as the top issues facing B.C. in 2018. Close behind were affordable housing, justice for Indigenous communities, education and democratic reform.

When asked to rank six “urgent democratic priorities” facing British Columbia, Dogwood supporters put “limiting corporate influence on government” at the top of the list, followed by “uncovering political corruption.” “Electoral reform” came in at number three. “Recognizing Indigenous rights & title” was next. “Improving voter turnout” and “expanding access to voting” rounded out the list.

These results reinforce anecdotal observations compiled from thousands of conversations, emails and social media comments: Dogwood supporters are deeply concerned by the climate crisis and the integrity of B.C.’s air, land and water – but not to the exclusion of issues of justice and democracy.

Like most British Columbians, Dogwood supporters want fair, clean elections and more accountability from elected officials. Electoral reform can be part of that.

LOCAL POWER

Core to Dogwood’s work is the principle of local control, especially on issues that affect the landbase and local communities. It’s why we support the recognition and implementation of Indigenous rights & title, and why we encourage grassroots participation in the democratic process, at all levels of government.

When it comes to large-scale, irreversible policies or projects, we believe the people most affected over the long term need to be included in making the decision. This is not about opposing all development or conferring a veto. Rather, it is about respecting local peoples’ rights, their expertise and vision for the future.

This sentiment is captured in the survey question below:



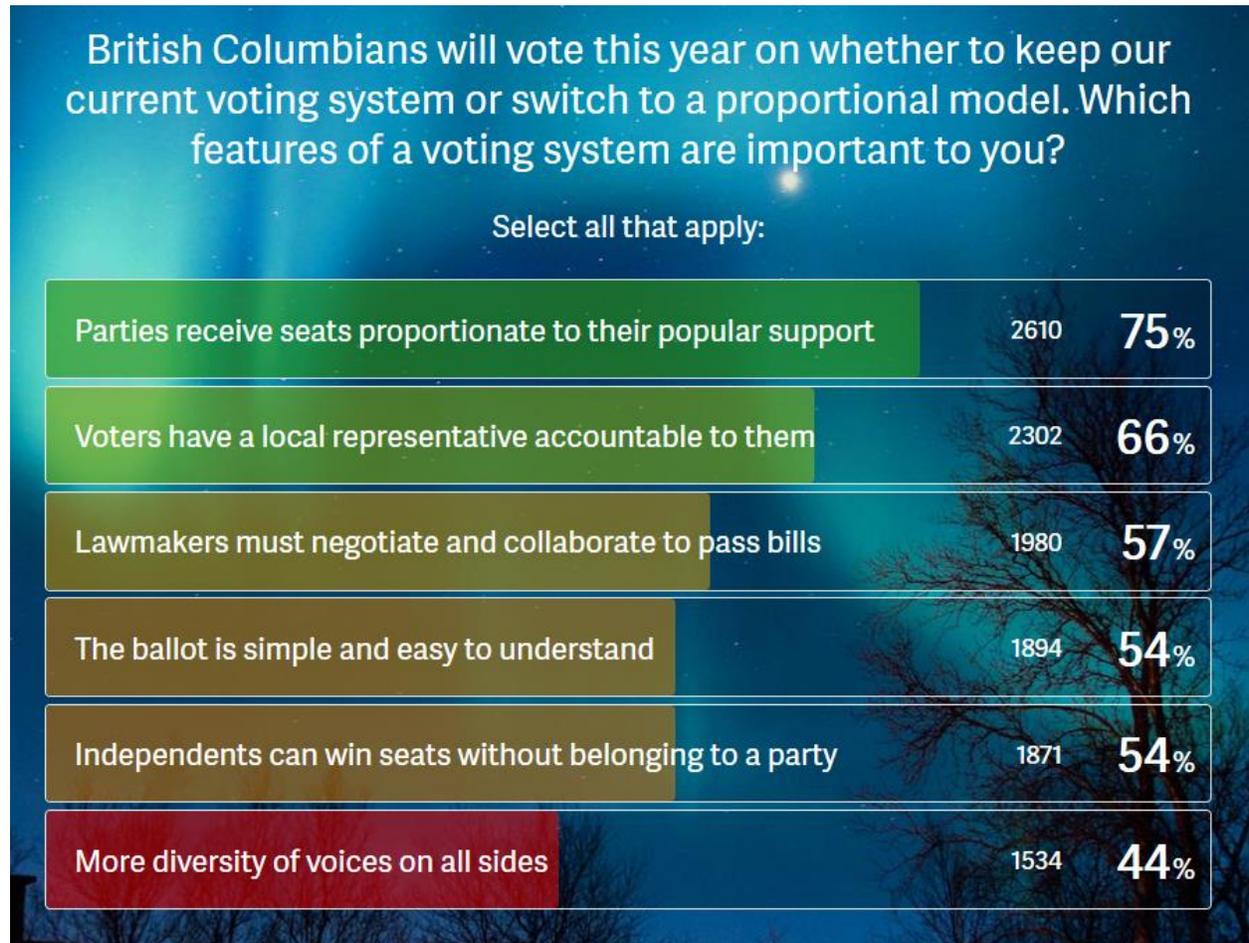
Screenshot from survey summary

While Dogwood supporters are deeply concerned by the looming climate crisis, most see a serious risk in overriding local and Indigenous people to serve a central policy agenda. (This is reflected in British Columbians’ continued opposition to increased oil tanker traffic on the West Coast, despite the federal government’s insistence that increased crude oil exports are key to Canada’s climate plan.)

Simply put, decisions made behind closed doors, or handed down by government decree – especially at a great geographic distance – are less likely to be seen as legitimate. By the same token, a political system that diminishes the input of local people, or reduces the accountability of MLAs to their constituents, is unlikely to get buy-in across B.C.

BALANCING PRIORITIES

Three-quarters of Dogwood supporters want a voting system that delivers seats proportionate to a party's popular support. At the same time, two-thirds say it's important to have a local representative accountable to them. Any new voting system would need to balance proportionality with the need for local representation, especially in rural B.C.



Screenshot from survey summary

There is clearly an appetite in B.C. for more collegial, collaborative politics, which may come with a proportional voting system and the presence of more parties in the legislature. On the other hand, improvements on this front might be realized through reforms unrelated to the shape and size of ridings, or the structure of the ballot.

Ballot simplicity is a priority for a majority of Dogwood supporters, which is important in making elections accessible and the results intuitive and legitimate. It's also worth pointing out the strong support for independents. This likely reflects a wariness of political parties and an appreciation for MLAs who are directly accountable to their constituents.

PROCESS RECOMMENDATIONS

The task facing the government is not an easy one. After two failed referenda on electoral reform, a third “no” vote will likely close the conversation forever. The appetite of NDP and Green supporters for proportional representation is high, yet the government must offer a process that is fair and free of political interference.

Whatever happens, it must be clear to reasonable observers that the results reflect the democratic will of ordinary British Columbians – not a scheme cooked up in a back room by political parties, third parties or special interests. If voters choose “yes,” the result must also provide enough clarity for Elections BC to design a new system.

After nearly two decades of grassroots political engagement with hundreds of thousands of British Columbians, we offer the following observations as they relate to the referendum ballot, question, timeline and process.

1. A referendum should not be rocket science.

Plebiscites and referenda are blunt instruments: good at delivering a broad democratic mandate, not good for designing complex public policy. Any voting-age citizen in the province should be able to make a decision on the question without a university degree or specialized knowledge about voting systems.

2. People don't have a lot of trust in politicians.

While it is elected officials who are charged with delivering this referendum, the more it can be insulated from political parties the better. The public simply can't be expected to trust that decisions or arguments by politicians, on any side, are free of partisan self-interest. On the other hand, Elections BC is widely respected for its competence and political independence.

3. We need a system designed for B.C.

British Columbia is culturally diverse and geographically vast, with most of the population concentrated in a very small area. Nearly all of the province sits on unceded land, meaning impacts on Indigenous communities must be considered and consultation undertaken on any major changes to the political system. No neighbouring jurisdictions use proportional systems that we can copy. There is likely no “off the shelf” system that will work in B.C. without modifications.

4. Eject button, please.

If voters chose PR, but changes to the electoral system result in perverse side-effects, British Columbians deserve a chance to go back to the old system.

Given these factors, Dogwood is inclined to suggest a short, simple referendum campaign which, if successful, would leave more time for Elections BC to design a new system before the next election.

The first question should ask whether voters would like to keep the current system or try a new, proportional system. If the answer is yes, citizens would need assurances of a broad, politically independent process – led by Elections BC, not the legislature – to consult citizens across the province, First Nations, academic advisors and election officials from jurisdictions that use PR, in order to design the best system for B.C.

It is unclear that asking a second question about various different acronyms would result in a clear mandate – or the political legitimacy to turn around and legislate a new system, whether under the umbrella of List PR, MMP, STV or MMM.

It is difficult for anyone to game out all the possible pros and cons of a new voting system, let alone three or four (with advocates for and against each acronym battling it out in a public campaign). Any “information package” would be further subject to accusations of bias for the information it includes and leaves out about each system. If anything, the inclusion of a second question is likely to suppress turnout in the referendum overall, because of the high barrier to informed participation.

If there must be a second question, we recommend asking about values or outcomes, not acronyms. Like the ranking exercise Dogwood presented to its supporters, such a question would provide a puzzle for Elections BC to solve: design a system that reconciles the need for a more proportional seat count with the other features important to British Columbians.

A simple ballot would require less money for public education campaigns, less material mailed out in information packages and less time for Elections BC to prepare. It could also be returned sooner, to avoid overlap with municipal elections in October. A mailout in June, for example, would avoid school summer holidays while also giving Elections BC an answer five months earlier than the legislated November deadline.

As for money, the less of it the better. A proponent group and opponent group should each receive a modest public grant, with the ability to take individual donations, subject to overall spending limits. Registered third parties should be subject to rigorous advertising limits and disclosure requirements. As important as it is to remove corporate and union money from our elections, it is even more crucial in the case of a referendum about our democracy that the public will be seen to prevail.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit our observations and recommendations as part of this preliminary process.