

Local PR: Enhancing voter choice and encouraging respectful, collaborative politics



All Votes Count Canada submission to the B.C. Public Consultations for a Referendum on Proportional Representation, February 28, 2018

Purpose of this submission

Previous submissions have done an excellent job of addressing ballot questions, funding, education and other issues related to the referendum and the choice of a new voting system. Although Local PR is briefly described in some of these submissions, some key values and design considerations underlying Local PR have been inadequately (and at times inaccurately) conveyed. This submission seeks to correct this.

What is Local PR?

Local PR is a proportional voting system that maximizes voter choice and retains local representation. It can be understood as STV with the added distinguishing requirement that each existing riding is retained and has one local MLA. Ridings are aggregated into electoral regions and the ballot allows voters to rank one or more candidates in their given region.¹ The number of ridings in an electoral region will vary in accordance with population density and community input (sparsely-populated rural regions might consist of only 3-4 ridings, while urban electoral regions might have 6-7 ridings). Every elected MLA represents both the riding in which they were nominated and their encompassing electoral region. Local PR therefore results in each citizen having both a local MLA for constituency matters (e.g. help with accessing provincial services for seniors...) and access to one or more regional MLAs that best reflect their policy orientation (e.g. for or against a pipeline, taxation policy...).

Local PR counting

The selection of the first winner for a voting region follows standard STV counting with a (Droop) quota. Once the first winning candidate is elected by reaching quota, the remaining candidates from that riding are necessarily eliminated (as there can only be one MLA per riding). All candidates from the remaining ridings remain in the running and standard STV counting is again applied. This runoff procedure continues sequentially until all ridings in the electoral region have a single elected MLA.

¹ Contrary to some erroneous claims in some other submissions, Local PR and other systems based on STV do not require a minimum number of ranked choices by each voter

Local PR electoral values and design criteria

Local PR was conceived as a voting system for Canada and Canadian provinces that could address many traditional arguments against proportional voting systems and thereby achieve wider cross-party support. Specific values and design criteria include:

Choice in how to vote: Local PR enables each voter to vote how they want. They can vote for just one person and follow a first-past-the-post (FPTP) approach. They can rank the local candidates they like, independently of party affiliation. Or they can follow a political party orientation, and just assign ranked votes to the party of their choice across their electoral region. As such, compared to other voting systems under consideration, Local PR offers the most choice in how one votes. This feature promotes wider acceptance and less opposition.

Local Representation: Local PR guarantees a locally nominated MLA is elected in each existing riding. This addresses a key concern of especially rural voters that was raised in the past two BC referenda on STV.

Sincere Voting: Preferential ballots let you sincerely vote for your favourite candidate as well as indicate any secondary preferences you wish to express.

An end to the frustration of strategic voting: Under FPTP, many voters end up voting for a lesser choice candidate who they think has more chance of winning instead of the candidate that best reflects their values and/or policy orientation. This contributes to voter frustration and disengagement from the political process. Under any STV-type system such as Local PR, voters will generally assign their first choice to the candidate they most desire, and then assign lower rankings to other candidates in case their first choice is eliminated.

All votes matter: Virtually every vote counts toward the election of a candidate chosen by the voter (almost certainly for voters who indicate 5 or more rankings).

Empowered and responsible MLAs: Each MLA will be elected with a stronger mandate (higher number of votes) than most current MLAs.

No additional MLAs: Local PR does not add seats to the Legislature.

Ease of implementation: Local PR is easy to implement before the next election. No changes in ridings nor additional seats in the Legislature are required. No change is needed to the party nomination process and existing MLAs can run in their home ridings.

A higher degree of mutual respect in political campaigns: Candidates have a better chance of winning a seat by reaching out to diverse voters to capture secondary and tertiary ballot rankings. Local PR thereby deters the politics of division ("wedge politics") that has become ever more prevalent in first-past-the-post countries such as the US, the UK, and even Canada.

A more collaborative political system: Electoral regions will generally have representatives from two or more political parties. This will encourage MLAs to cooperate to jointly represent their regional interests.

Constituent and policy representation: Each citizen would have access to both a local MLA for constituency matters, and one or more regional MLAs who might better represent them on specific policy matters.

No disincentives against independent candidates: The claim that proportional representation might serve to further entrench political parties as argued in the submission by the Canadian Association to Restore Democracy, reflects a limited understanding of some of the PR options actually on the table in BC. Local PR does not require "entrenching" of political parties. Quite to the contrary, that choice is fully left to the voter. Without any party lists, Local PR provides more opportunity for independent candidates to win a seat than any non-STV type voting systems.

Addressing some possible concerns about Local PR

Incomplete proportionality: As with any STV-type system without top-ups, proportionality decreases for parties that have less than $100/(\text{number of ridings in voting region} + 1)$ percentage of the popular vote. So for a voting region with 5 ridings, the quota would be $100/6=16.7\%$ of total votes cast. Some may find this an asset in discouraging "small fringe and extremist parties".

Detailed electoral modelling (<http://localpr.ca/modelling/html/overview/index.html>) indicates that Local PR with an average of 5 ridings per electoral region can meet the proportionality target (Gallagher index of 5 or better) chosen by the Special Parliamentary Committee on Electoral Reform (ERRE). For parties close to this threshold in regional popular vote, the ability to vote for one's first choice without fear of a wasted vote may more than offset this reduction in proportionality (especially since secondary rankings may also accrue to such a party). Furthermore, after the experience of a few elections, full proportionality, if desired, could be achieved with the addition of significantly fewer top-up seats than required by systems such as MMP. These top-up seats could be assigned to groupings of two or more electoral regions. Top-up seats could also be used to reduce the number of ridings in an electoral region while increasing proportionality.

Local PR uses a single transferable vote and STV was rejected in the last BC referendum on electoral reform: During the last referendum, arguably the key argument against STV was the increase in local riding size and associated possibility of the local MLA residing much farther from a subset of constituents (especially for rural regions with low population density). Local PR resolves these concerns and otherwise incorporates the many strengths of STV that resulted in it being chosen by a BC citizen's assembly.

Time required for counting votes: A purely manual vote count for Local PR would take a few days. However, as used in many other STV jurisdictions, we recommend paper ballots combined with electronic scanners. This would permit vote counting to be complete as soon as the poll closes. Recounts could be obtained by using the same scanners, scanners from different ridings, and manual recounts.

Complexity: There are criticisms both about the complexity of the voting process and the counting procedure. In a society where the complexity of smartphones that even many of our children use was on the edge of science fiction half a century ago, the criticism of the complexity of vote counting has little merit. A more appropriate orientation would be to adopt as much complexity as required but no more. We believe Local PR meets this criterion.

As to the criticism concerning the "complexity" of having to rank ballots, if Irish and Australian voters can handle STV type systems, why can't British Columbians? Furthermore, voters are free to rank only one or two candidates.

Referendum threshold and dealing with the lack of perfection

Referendum threshold: One current submission to this consultation is predicated on requiring significantly more than a simple majority of votes cast to pass a binding referendum on changing the voting system. We note that since there has never been a referendum to choose the current FPTP voting system, this argument is disingenuous. Furthermore, this imposes a threshold that few political parties have ever met in a provincial or federal election in Canada.

Voting system perfection: Given the number of perverse electoral outcomes Canada and Canadian provinces have experienced this past century, there is no basis for demanding that any replacement voting system should be perfect. There will always be trade-offs. A more appropriate orientation in our world of accelerating change and challenges is to try something better, evaluate and learn, and evolve from experience.

In Conclusion

If the commission determines that the majority of BC citizens may favour a proportional voting system that: 1) does not require extra seats in the legislature and 2) retains existing ridings, each with a locally nominated MLA, then Local PR is arguably the simplest proportional representation voting system that meets these criteria. Local PR offers the widest choice in how to vote. Like other STV-type systems, it encourages respectful political discourse and collaboration.

We welcome any questions and concerns.

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All Votes Count Canada

Local PR aims to define a consensus voting system which embraces and supports Canadians' electoral values. It is endorsed by J.-P. Kingsley (past Chief Electoral Officer of Canada) and eminent scholars D. Pilon and P. Russell.

For more in-depth information see localpr.ca or the FAQ on www.allvotescount.ca or contact All Votes Count Canada at info@allvotescount.ca

All Votes Count Canada (AVCC) is an incorporated non-profit organization dedicated to building a cross-party and cross-electoral reform compromise if not consensus around: a) core electoral values and design principles and b) a resulting voting system that reflects these values and principles. Local PR is the evolving product of this ongoing discussion and consensus-building.