



## **YES PR BC Submission on the BC Electoral Reform Referendum Process**

*January 2018*

### **Introduction**

Thank you for this opportunity to present our recommendations regarding the BC electoral reform process.

YES PR BC is a diverse, cross partisan and independent alliance of people from across British Columbia campaigning in favour of a more representative and democratic electoral system in B.C.. In addition to this submission, we hope to be actively involved in the post-consultation process in the run up to the referendum, including the framing of the question, campaigning, and mobilizing the YES vote. We also plan to offer public education across the province on the benefits of a proportional electoral system in BC, and to raise awareness of the continuing damage that first-past-the-post is doing to our democracy.

Following the general structure of Citizen Engagement BC's online consultation questions, the following are YES PR BC's recommendations on ballot questions, public education, campaign funding and timing for the proposed referendum on electoral reform. Our recommendations prioritize measures we believe will maximize clarity, fairness and citizen participation in the proposed referendum.

### **Recommendation 1: Ballot Structure and Question**

We recommend a two-question ballot for the electoral reform referendum.

The first question should simply ask voters whether they wish to continue with B.C.'s existing First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) system for provincial elections, or change to some form of Proportional Representation (PR).

The second question should ask all voters (including those who voted to maintain FPTP) that, in the event that a majority of voters endorse change in the first ballot question, which is their preferred form of PR

In the interests of clarity, we recommend that the choices listed in the second question be limited to three options, all based on existing electoral systems that have been successfully implemented in other jurisdictions. Voters would be asked to rank these three options in order of preference.

The three ballot options we recommend for Question Two are:

- Regional List Proportional Representation
- Mixed Member Proportional Representation
- Single Transferable Vote

This two-question approach would allow voters to endorse a move away from FPTP without restricting them to a single alternative system, as was the case with previous B.C. electoral reform referenda in 2005 and 2009. Having a ranked list of options to choose from could help build consensus around a form of proportional representation that is acceptable to a majority of voters, including those who would have preferred maintaining FPTP.



## **Recommendation 2: Public Education for the Referendum**

We recommend that the provincial government avoid trying to provide detailed explanations and education around alternative electoral systems in the run up to the referendum. Instead, Elections BC's focus should be on informing the public about when to vote, how to register, and how to obtain a mail-in ballot.

This recommendation is based on two rationales:

1. It will be difficult for government agencies to be seen as credible and impartial sources of information, given that the governing party campaigned on electoral reform.
2. The complexity of the systems proposed, coupled with government efforts to present information 'impartially,' could result in Elections BC (or other government agencies) producing overly complicated and potentially confusing educational material. We believe that the official electoral reform proponent campaign is best suited to take on the role of education, and that explanations and engagement must come from civil society to be credible.

## **Recommendation 3: Proponent Status and Funding**

We recommend applying the existing provincial election campaign financing rules to the referendum campaign, but having the pre-election spending cap come into force on March 1, 2018. This would effectively ban big money from the campaign and close existing loopholes that allow special interests to spend money (without regulation) outside of the pre-election period (which is typically three months before the official start of the campaign period).

## **Recommendation 4: Options on the Ballot**

Voters should have a choice between credible, functioning systems that are in use in analogous western democracies, like our own. The options presented should only include systems that are proportional. The government should avoid including 'pure list' or 'closed list' PR, as well as any system that is less proportional. Closed list PR systems restrict voter choice and can allocate excessive power to political party bureaucracies.

The names used to label the options presented on the ballot should correspond with the conventional names used internationally to describe those electoral systems.

We recommend the following three options be included on the ballot:

- **Regional List Proportional Representation**  
*As used in Norway, Denmark and Sweden's respective parliamentary elections.*
- **Mixed Member Proportional Representation**  
*As used in New Zealand, Germany, the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly of Wales.*
- **Single Transferable Vote**  
*As used in the Republic of Ireland, as well as the Australian Senate and some Australian state government elections*



### **Recommendation 5: Timing of referendum**

Because this is a mail-in ballot, the government should ensure that the vote takes place in October 2018. An October vote would allow for one full month of engaged public campaigning in September, after the summer has ended, and could also benefit from 'piggybacking' on the added public awareness and civic engagement associated with local elections happening across B.C. this fall.

We strongly recommend the vote should not happen during the summer months. A summer vote would likely see reduced voter turnout, with many British Columbians on vacation or otherwise distracted from civic engagement. Post-secondary students would be particularly disadvantaged by a summer vote, as many have precarious and shifting housing situations over the summer months.

Elections BC should also make it easy for voters to request their postal ballots through an online form or email. In addition, physical balloting locations should be set up on post-secondary campuses and in government agency offices to ensure opportunities to vote for those British Columbians without permanent fixed addresses.

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Thank you again for this opportunity to provide input on the electoral reform referendum process.