

# **Committee for Voting Equity in BC (VotingBC)**

## **Recommendations for Referendum on How We Vote**

### **About Us:**

The Committee for Voting Equity in BC (VotingBC) made presentations to two hearings of the B.C. Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform in 2004. We also made the longest, most comprehensive of the 1,603 written submissions. VotingBC's Chair, Maxwell Anderson, PhD, also served on the Board of Directors of Fair Voting BC while it was the official proponent of the Yes campaign in B.C.'s 2009 referendum.

### **Our #1 Key Recommendation:**

**The Government of B.C. should campaign for proportional representation (PR).**

The Government made an election promise to campaign for proportional representation; it has a duty to fulfill this promise by campaigning vigorously for PR. The Attorney General and Elections BC should, of course, remain neutral while fulfilling their duties.

### **Our #2 Key Recommendation:**

**The Government of B.C.'s referendum should offer an attractive voting system to voters.**

One particular form of PR, known as "Mixed-Member Proportional" (MMP), is considered the best voting system, according to a large-scale survey of political scientist electoral system experts (Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties Vol. 15(1), 3-19). Various surveys of the public have also determined that MMP is the most popular PR voting system.

British Columbians strongly prefer an "open-list" version of MMP, meaning that voters, not parties, get to choose the winning candidates. In a typical arrangement, voters simply make one vote for a local candidate and one vote for a regional candidate. The vote for a regional candidate acts as a vote for that candidate's party.

If the MMP system uses 60% local seats and 40% regional seats out of the present total of 87 seats, then there would be 52 local seats. This would be the same number of local seats, each having the same geographic size, as we had in 1963 and earlier. This would allay fears of excessive local district size.

Technical details that you, dear reader, may wish to skip: MMP includes one of a variety of formulas, by which the number of regional seats allocated to each party compensates for disproportionality in the local seats. To prevent political parties gaming the system by running only for the regional seats, the formula used should calculate a party's proportional number of seats from the total of its local and regional votes, or alternatively include a requirement that a party be credited with

no more regional votes in a given region than the total of its local votes in that region. Either of these options will ensure the integrity of the system.

### **Referendum Success:**

If a referendum is to pass, it's critical that we, the public, be offered a voting system that we *like*. British Columbians would not approve any "closed-list" system of the type rejected in the 2007 Ontario referendum (i.e., a system where political parties get to create their own list of candidates in a pre-set order, where top-listed candidates are practically guaranteed a seat simply by virtue of their having been placed at the top of the list). Unfortunately the initial description of MMP given at the government website <https://engage.gov.bc.ca/howwewote/> seems biased in favour of closed-list MMP. B.C. experts and the public strongly prefer open-list MMP by which voters, not parties, get to choose the regional winners. Examples of open-list MMP include the electoral system of the German province (landtag) of Bavaria, which currently and usually has a single-party majority government, and the open-list MMP passed in the 2016 P.E.I. referendum though not implemented.

### **STV:**

What about the Single Transferable Vote (STV), rejected by 60% of voters in 2009? Surveys are quite clear that the more people learn about PR the more they like PR (on average), yet the more they learn about STV the less they like STV. Why is this? It's believed due to the ranking necessary for STV. Voters would be happy to rank the political parties, but STV asks them to rank five, twelve, or more candidates, most or all of whose names they don't remember—embarrassingly, not even the incumbent—a frustrating exercise.

### **List PR:**

The choice of PR systems should be limited to systems for which there is an actual history of usage, to avoid alarming referendum voters about experimental systems. Besides MMP and STV, the remaining alternative in actual usage is List PR, which is the favourite of political parties internationally. Few people have proposed that B.C. adopt List PR because of its large multi-member districts and perceived transfer of power from voters to political parties.

### **The Referendum Question(s):**

We may ask, should the referendum have two questions, the first on PR in general and the second on choice among particular PR systems? Surveys of the public suggest MMP would be more popular than either STV or List PR. If so, then it would only be advantageous to have a two-part referendum if this would increase the likelihood of passing the referendum. If two questions are used, then the question on PR could be worded with these two choices:

- B.C. should use proportional representation voting.
- B.C. should use single member plurality voting.

Otherwise, a straightforward status quo vs. MMP referendum ballot would seem preferable, because this would make the government look more certain of the decision to change the voting system, and make the choice of PR system appear less iffy—it would inspire more confidence among voters who might have been hesitant about approving change of an unsettled nature.

A third alternative that some have proposed would be to have a single referendum question on PR, with choice of particular system to be worked out afterwards by a panel of experts, but this would attract a lot of doubt.

### **In Summary:**

The modest but wide-ranging benefits of PR for gender equality, voter turnout, etc., have been widely discussed and their value will be debated over the months to come. Political scientists are widely agreed that PR will make almost every vote count, give almost every voter a representative whom they helped elect, attract better candidates to a more consensus-driven legislature, and improve regional representation on both the opposition and government benches.

PR is also associated with better government performance (*Patterns of Democracy* 2nd Ed. 2012 by Arend Lijphart, 348 pages, and many other references). The savings from more efficient government with PR justify the government campaigning for it with substantial funding, certainly on the order of the \$5.5 million budget of the 2004 B.C. Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform.

*Submitted Feb. 2, 2018, by Committee for Voting Equity in BC (VotingBC)*

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