

Burnaby Board of Trade's Electoral Reform Task Force

REFERENDUM REPORT:

November 22, 2018: British Columbia is currently holding a mail-in referendum on the electoral system used to elect the Members of the Legislature which make up the provincial government.

Throughout the referendum period, the Burnaby Board of Trade has provided information and resources for our members to learn more about the electoral systems being considered. In light of the low rate of participation in the referendum thus far, the Burnaby Board of Trade sought to further clarify the arguments on both sides for the benefit of those still waiting to vote, and therefore is pleased to issue this Electoral Reform Referendum Report ahead of the deadline for having ballots accepted of November 30.

This report was created with the participation of members on our *Electoral Reform Task Force*, who met and identified fundamental principles and areas of concern which they thought were important to assess. With that, the Task Force then met with representatives from the official proponent and opponent groups and analyzed the arguments made for and against electoral reform. The Task Force then sought to summarize the key arguments it felt were relevant and compelling for consideration into this report.



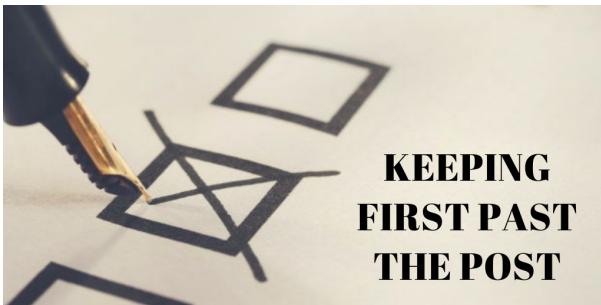
Our current voting system, First-Past-The-Post, provides British Columbians with clear and simple elections that create a direct link from each community to their individual elected representative, while creating overall governments that have broad-based support and which are functional, stable, and easily accountable.

BC is a great place to live, and already routinely leads the country in economic performance, in environmental leadership, and in many health and education measures. There is no issue our current system is unable to address, and no guarantee that proportional representation will lead to any better outcomes than we already enjoy despite being such a significant change.



British Columbia is at a democratic crossroads: participation in elections is sliding as turnout declines, political decorum and debate is coarsening, and cynicism is growing as many feel their vote doesn't matter and their voice is not heard.

The electoral reform referendum provides BC with a unique opportunity to choose the best elements of several systems to create a made-in-BC solution to improve our political system and renew our democracy. Proportional representation in BC will provide for fair, engaging and competitive elections which will create locally-elected and locally-responsive governments that will deliver more consistent policies with broad-based support.



Broad-Based.

Admittedly, fewer minor parties are able to gain a foothold in a First-Past-The-Post system like we have now. While that may, arguably, limit the representation of some groups in our government, it also ensures that those elected to government tend to be large, moderate parties with broad-based support.

Our current system encourages political parties to bring together people from a variety of backgrounds, viewpoints, and geographic locations to form the “big tent” parties we see today. With this, the inevitable battle of ideas and priorities and policies happens up-front and voters know what the parties stand for. Under proportional representation, that incentive to coalesce is weakened, and it is very likely BC could see the fracturing of our existing party structure into several smaller parties formed on an ideological, geographic, or demographic basis.

Accountable.

The likely outcome of every proportional representation election would be either minority governments propped up by a supporting party, or the formation of ad-hoc coalitions of several parties. Either way, voters would be limited in knowing how a party or candidate will act once the election is over as policies are horse-traded during minority/coalition negotiations. In addition, smaller parties may be allowed to become “kingmakers” with undue influence to set policy by dictating terms for their support.

In comparison, First-Past-The-Post provides voters with all the tools they need to hold both

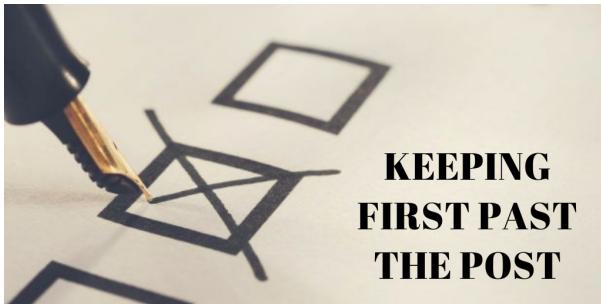
Fair, Engaging and Competitive

One of the greatest advantages of proportional representation is its inherent fairness. When the legislative assembly meets in Victoria following an election, citizens will see a provincial government which better reflects how BC actually voted—if a party received 10%, 20% or 60% of the vote from British Columbians, it will receive that percentage of the overall seats in the government.

Proportional representation will also make our elections more competitive and will engage every voter by addressing the issues of “safe seats” and “strategic voting.”

For the many British Columbians who live in “safe seats”—ridings which routinely elect representatives from the same political party—the election result is rarely in doubt and so their vote has little impact and they can become disengaged. In these safe seats the real power rests not with citizens but instead with the political parties and their insiders during their candidate selection process. In addition, having “safe seats” means only a handful of voters in a handful of ridings can determine the outcome of an election, incentivizing politicians to cater to them instead of appealing to everyone. By counting all votes in determining the make-up of the government, proportional representation ensures that every voter has an influence on the outcome.

Proportional representation will also engage voters more by limiting the impact of “strategic voting”, where someone casts a ballot not for the candidate they support, but for whoever is best positioned to defeat the candidate they dislike the most. Strategic voting is an unfortunate outcome



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governments and individual representatives to account for their actions. If local voters like their MLA more than any other candidate, they get re-elected. Similarly, as First-Past-The-Post tends to create single-party majority governments, it is easy for voters to know who is responsible for government actions and vote accordingly.

Local.

Having a parliamentary democracy means that our provincial government is made up of directly-elected representatives from 87 ridings across the province, ensuring a direct link back from the legislature to local communities throughout BC.

While First-Past-The-Post does allow for elections to be decided with a plurality (not necessarily a majority) of the vote, the simple fact remains that everyone who wins a seat in our current system received more votes than any of their competitors. However, with proportional representation that may not be true, as province-wide vote calculations may determine Burnaby gets one of its MLAs from outside our community and with fewer votes than other local candidates.

Simple.

Elections are a fundamental part of democracies and the singular expression of our franchise. Currently, elections in BC are simple, ballots are easy to understand, and results are known, verifiable, and trustworthy. With a change to any system of proportional representation, elections and their results will become significantly more complicated as elections become the territory of experts and algorithms, not of everyday voters and citizens. Further, the choice voters are being



CHANGING TO PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

of our First-Past-The-Post system and proportional representation will provide voters the ability to vote how they want to without fearing that it will somehow result in an outcome which they don't want.

Locally Elected and Locally Responsive

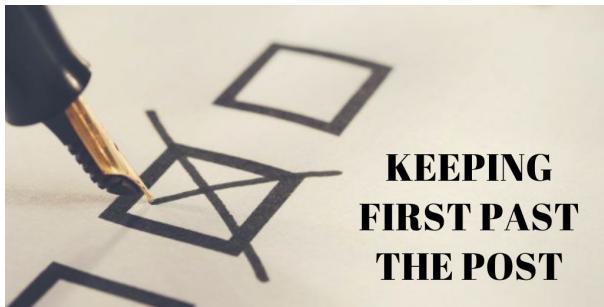
BC is a diverse province with distinct regions and therefore local representation in government is fundamental. As provincial MLAs are each elected in local ridings, the current First-Past-The-Post system is very good at ensuring a strong link between the provincial government and local communities across the province.

That is why each of the proportional representation systems in this referendum build on that strength and guarantee the local election of MLAs. Under proportional representation, all British Columbians will elect their local MLA directly, just as we do under our current system.

Proportional representation will then allow for additional, regionally-based representatives that will serve local constituents more broadly, and which will be elected based on the overall vote to ensure that our government better reflects the will of the province as a whole.

Consistent and Predictable

The current First-Past-The-Post system tends to result in majority governments which can enact their agenda largely unimpeded. Subsequent elections, however, can easily result in a different majority which will have the full power to completely reverse direction. This "policy lurch" is the opposite of consistency and predictability, and



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asked to make is only clear and simple in regards to First-Past-The-Post. While for our current system voters have all the details and information in hand, this cannot be said about the proportional representation options which leave many of the fundamental details to be decided after the vote.

Functional.

First-Past-The-Post also tends to lead to majority governments which deliver a stable and predictable government that functions for the duration of a term. While still possible should that be the wish of voters, minority governments and coalitions are much less likely under our current system. For those who value limiting unpredictability from government, First-Past-The-Post offers voters the ability to choose a majority government, a choice which proportional representation would almost certainly limit.



is a characteristic of our current system.

For those, including businesses, who care less about predictability in *who government is*, but more about *what government does*, proportional representation will provide this certainty.

Under proportional representation, governments will almost always be either minority governments or coalitions, both of which will require consensus building and collaboration. While this has the potential of devolving into “horse trading”—with parties negotiating away policies and priorities for influence—it will result in policy agendas which have the support of several parties representing a majority of British Columbians. Instead of lurching from one policy extreme to the next, proportional representation will create more lasting policy outcomes as they have a broader base of support.

About

The Burnaby Board of Trade thanks the members who participated on the Electoral Reform Task Force. All Burnaby Board of Trade policy positions and advocacy efforts are member driven, and are built through collaborative consultations with members and are approved by our member-led committees and board of directors.

For more information on this or any Burnaby Board of Trade policy or advocacy effort, please visit www.bbot.ca/advocacy or contact Cory Redekop, Manager of Policy & Stakeholder Relations at cory@bbot.ca or 604-412-0100.

The Burnaby Board of Trade is the largest and most active business networking, advocacy and economic development organization in the city of Burnaby and the Metro Vancouver region. For more information, visit www.bbot.ca