

HOW WE VOTE

Recommendations from the British Columbia
Federation of Students for the 2018 Referendum



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WHO WE ARE

The British Columbia Federation of Students represents over 130,000 post-secondary students at 13 colleges and universities in every region of BC. The recommendations herein are representative of the current priorities of those students, as brought forward by their respective students' unions and societies.

At our 36th annual general meeting in January 2018, students' unions representing students at all affiliated institutions passed a resolution to endorse the call for proportional voting in British Columbia. The resolution included a commitment to ensure educational materials would be made available to post-secondary students not only about proportional representation, but also about the referendum process.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS:

The British Columbia Federation of Students recommends the following key points:

Timing of Referendum: The referendum campaign should not overlap with the fall municipal election campaigns, and instead should occur after the conclusion of those campaigns.

Confirmation Referendum: After two election cycles with a new electoral system, British Columbians should be provided the opportunity to confirm that they support proportional voting.

Campaign Finance and Third-Party Advertising Regulations: The referendum should be subject to regulations that limit the influence of big money.

Ballot Question: The ballot should include a specific question requesting a public mandate to adopt proportional voting that is linked to a transparent public process to choose a specific proportional system.



TIMING OF REFERENDUM


Holding a referendum in Fall 2018 presents unique challenges in ensuring that British Columbians are able to make an informed decision. The most obvious restriction is the municipal election campaigns, which will be run in Fall 2018 in every municipality in BC. For students, however, there are other timelines that are important to take into consideration.

Students are somewhat transient by nature, and their home/ mailing address can sometimes change frequently. A change of address is most common in August/September, when students are returning to the community where they attend school, and finding a place to live. If the referendum were to occur using a mail-in ballot, many students would not have up-to-date records with Elections BC in September. This means that they would not receive a ballot and therefore not be able to participate in the vote.

Another important timeline to consider for students is the end of the semester. At a time when many British Columbians are starting to think about Christmas, post-secondary students are struggling to complete term papers and projects, and studying for final exams. The level of dedication to their studies at this time in particular would not allow students the time to educate themselves on the topic—especially if all forms of proportional voting are on the ballot.

Recommendation:

The referendum campaign should not overlap with the fall municipal election campaigns, and should instead occur after the municipal elections are complete. This will ensure students who move for school have time to register the address they hold while studying and will make the mail-in ballot process more accessible for post-secondary students overall.




CONFIRMATION REFERENDUM

Many voters may be interested in a change to the voting system but are hesitant to vote for change for fear of the unknown. For this reason, we recommend the government hold a confirmation referendum two electoral cycles after the implementation of a new electoral system. A confirmation referendum will give the electorate time to experience and learn a different system and then provide them with the option to decide on whether they wish to continue with it.

Recommendation:

The provincial government should hold a confirmation referendum two election cycles after the implementation of a new system.





CAMPAIGN FINANCE AND THIRD-PARTY ADVERTISING REGULATIONS

Public debate during this referendum should serve broad public interests, and not the interests of corporations or the wealthy who benefit from our current system. Unregulated donations will result in the wild west that BC elections used to be, where those with special interests can leverage public debate in their favour. Therefore, we recommend the same rules that apply to third-party campaigning in general elections should be in effect. We believe these regulations should be in place the same day the legislature adopts the referendum question.

We also recommend that one official proponent group and one official opponent group are recognized during the campaign period. The proponent and opponent groups should have a spending limit of no more than \$0.50 per registered elector and be provided with a minimum of \$500,000 each by the province to begin the campaign.

Recommendation:

The referendum should be subject to regulations similar to those that limit the influence of big money in general elections.



BALLOT QUESTION

It is important that the referendum be as clear and direct as possible. The question posed to British Columbians should be concise and unambiguous—a decision of whether or not the voter wishes to move to a proportional voting system or stay with first-past-the-post. Following a successful referendum, a transparent process for deciding which form of proportional voting would then allow input from the public and avoid the perception of backroom deals or intentional privileging of one form over others.

The alternate ballot option would be to provide a list of forms of proportional representation, many of which have similar names. The sheer volume of information required in a campaign period from proponents of the various options, as well as proponents of not changing the system, would be overwhelming to say the least. A clear question about whether or not a voter supports a new voting system will allow someone to make an informed decision to mandate the government to implement change.

Recommendation:

The ballot should contain a specific question requesting a public mandate to adopt proportional voting that is linked to a transparent public process to choose a specific proportional system.



STUDENTS ARE VOTING

Youth and students are traditionally under-represented in municipal, provincial, and federal elections and referendums. This lack of participation gives cause for many politicians, government officials, and other decision-makers to ignore students and youth as an important constituency because they do not fear their impact at the ballot box.

However, the lack of student and youth participation in elections and referendums is not reflective of political apathy or disengagement, as evidenced by the high level of youth and student involvement in volunteerism, community service, and campaigns or initiatives to promote environmentalism, equity, social justice, human rights, and many other public causes. In fact, in the 2015 federal election, students and young people made waves by coming out to the polls in record numbers. In British Columbia alone, those 18 to 24 years old increased their voter participation by 24%, and youth in BC had the second-highest voter turnout in the country.

Post-secondary students and youth are often highly transient as a population and face many barriers to voting in elections and referendums, including the lack of standard forms of identification and proof of residence. If the above-listed recommendations are accepted and implemented, this referendum will see an increased participation of youth and will result in more political leverage for students on many important issues.