

Will History Repeat Itself in BC-STV Referendum?

For the second consecutive general election, British Columbians have the chance to make Canadian electoral history. On May 12th voters in BC will have the choice of discarding the traditional first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system in favour of a customized single transferable vote system known as BC-STV.

In 2005, 57.7 percent of voters cast their ballots in favour of BC-STV, falling just 2.3 percent shy of the 60 percent threshold set by the provincial government.[1] The narrow margin and lack of voter knowledge motivated Premier Gordon Campbell to hold a second referendum with the same super-majority threshold: 60 percent province-wide support and 50 percent support in at least 51 of BC's 85 electoral districts.[2]

BC-STV is the product of a December 2004 provincial Citizens' Assembly for Electoral Reform recommendation which proposed the system after 12 months of hearings and deliberations. BC-STV was chosen for its proportionality (a party's proportion of elected members is said to more likely reflect its share of popular support), local representation and voter choice.[3]

Here is how BC-STV would deliver more proportional results. MLAs would be elected in multiple member districts composed of 2 to 7 members. Voters would rank candidates according to their preference (1, 2, 3, etc.). A successful candidate would need to accumulate a predetermined percentage of votes based on voters' preferences distributed according to a mathematical formula.[4]

Interestingly, in 2005 voters were asked merely if they wished to adopt BC-STV; the 2009 referendum question asks voters to indicate their support *either* for retaining FPTP *or* adopting BC-STV.[5] The ballots of those who support electoral reform, but oppose both FPTP and BC-STV, may be crucial to the outcome on May 12th.

British Columbians for BC-STV (Fair Vote BC), the officially designated proponent organization, claims FPTP is "6 [times] less proportional than STV," leading to a less representative and responsive provincial legislature than would result from an election held under the STV alternative.[6] Multimember districts would enhance local representation by helping ensure all regions are represented in provincial legislatures and by giving citizens the ability to choose from several MLAs to address their concerns.[7]

British Columbians for BC-STV also predict improved women's representation

under BC-STV,[8] reduced campaign costs,[9] and higher voter turnout.[10]

No STV, the official opponent organization, argues that the complicated transfer of ballots will turn voters away and distort results.[11] They also dispute that BC-STV is more proportional, noting that in other countries STV has produced disproportionate results.[12] Above all, they highlight that candidates could be elected with only 12.5 percent of ballots cast in some districts.[13]

No STV also claims that voter choice may decrease with fewer parties running candidates, as is the case in Ireland. Furthermore, they argue that districts would be too big to provide effective local representation.[14]

The provincial Liberals and New Democrats have remained officially neutral, as in 2005.[15] The provincial Green Party has thrown its support behind BC-STV.[16]

In Alberta, electoral reform proponents Fair Vote Alberta started a petition campaign for a Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform similar to those in BC and Ontario, where voters rejected electoral reform proposals in a 2007 referendum.[17] Fair Vote Alberta has not proposed a specific system to replace FPTP, however the organization aims for more proportional election results.[18] The recently introduced Bill 45, the *Electoral Boundaries Commission Amendment Act, 2009*,[19] would add 4 new electoral districts before the next provincial election, which may prompt a wider public debate about electoral reform in Alberta.

Will British Columbians usher in Canada's most significant electoral reform in decades on May 12th? A recent poll suggests an uphill battle for BC-STV supporters, with 53 percent of potential voters, a drop from the 2005 tally, indicating they would vote for the new electoral system.[20]

[1] Elections BC, "[Statement of Votes: Referendum on Electoral Reform](#)" (14 Nov 2005).

[2] Government of British Columbia, Referendum Information Office, "Why Are We Having This Referendum?" (undated).

[3] Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform, "BC-STV Fact Sheet" (Dec 2004).

[4] Government of British Columbia, Referendum Information Office, "Tell Me About First-Past-The-Post and BC-STV" (undated).

[5] Government of British Columbia, Referendum Information Office, "Welcome," (undated).

[6] British Columbians for BC-STV, "Our current inaccurate voting system is 6X

less proportional than STV” (undated).

[7] British Columbians for BC-STV, “Providing a voice for communities outside the lower mainland” (undated).

[8] British Columbians for BC-STV, “Women’s representation will improve under BC-STV” (undated).

[9] British Columbians for BC-STV, “Campaign Costs Under STV in Ireland are Much Lower than in BC” (undated).

[10] British Columbians for BC-STV, “Voter turnout is higher where STV is used” (undated).

[11] No STV, “[BC-STV Vote Count Confusion](#),” (undated).

[12] David Schreck, “[BC-STV is simply no better than our current electoral system](#)” *Straight.com* (13 Feb 2009).

[13] No STV, “[STV - Know more before you vote](#)” (undated).

[14] *Supra* note 12.

[15] Darah Hansen, “STV support, opposition both cut across party lines” *Vancouver Sun* (30 April 2009).

[16] Green Party of BC, “Greens back BC-STV for fairer representation” (15 April 2009).

[17] Wendy Chung, “Ontario referendum 2007: Electoral reform or not?” *cbc.ca* (21 Sept 2007).

[18] Fair Vote Alberta, “[Fair Vote Alberta](#)” (undated).

[19] 2nd Sess., 27th Leg., Alberta, 2009.

[20] Graeme Wood, “Poll shows STV referendum supporters have some work to do” *Vancouver Sun* (2 May 2009).