



# Electoral reform in BC

Tuesday, May 12 is Provincial Election and Referendum Day

*Based on the recommendation of the BC Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, BC voters have the chance to vote for a proportional representation model of voting. CPJ has supported proportional representation for many years. This brochure is meant to help our BC supporters understand and vote for the proposal before them.*

## **What is this referendum about?**

This referendum has come about because of widespread frustration with BC's highly polarized politics, where only two parties typically win seats. Election results frequently don't reflect the popular vote, and many voters feel there is little point in voting.

Even politicians have experienced problems with this system. Our current premier, Gordon Campbell, and the Liberal Party lost an election in 1996 despite winning 3% more of the popular vote than the victorious NDP. This result was widely seen as unfair, and Campbell promised that, if elected in 2001, he would address the inequities in our voting system. The approach he took was unique. Proclaiming that "the rules of democracy should be designed by the people they serve, not by the power brokers who may wish that the democracy worked in their interests," Premier Campbell established a Citizens' Assembly to consider whether our current voting system was serving

BC voters well and, if not, what way of voting would be best. This assembly was composed of one man and one woman randomly selected from each provincial riding, plus two representatives of First Nations communities – 160 in total. The assembly members spent nearly a year in study and public meetings.

## **What did the Assembly conclude?**

The Citizens' Assembly overwhelmingly decided that BC needed electoral reform. Early on, they identified the values that mattered most to British Columbians: proportionality, choice, and local representation. After considering a wide variety of possible voting systems, they recommended the Single Transferable Vote (STV), in which multipartisan teams of MLAs are elected to represent small regions within the province. The intent of STV is to maximize the number of voters who are able to elect a specific MLA of their choosing. The Assembly's decision was nearly

unanimous – 95% voted to recommend STV to the people of BC – and BC voters supported this recommendation in 2005 by voting 58% in favour, though the government had decided not to accept a Yes vote unless it achieved 60%.

## **Why is this a public justice issue?**

CPJ's interest in electoral reform grows out of our strong belief in justly accommodating diversity and respecting the reality of pluralism. We believe that the wide range of opinions and values Canadians hold need to find expression within our political institutions. Our legislatures should reflect the true diversity of opinion found in the country.

A more proportional electoral system helps ensure this by encouraging parties to take principled and distinct stands on various issues, and by allowing voters to more sincerely express their values at election time by reducing strategic voting.

# How does the Single Transferable Vote work?

STV makes three key changes to the way we vote now:

**1. Multi-member districts.** Since two neighbours may not agree on who they want to represent them, STV uses multi-member districts so that different voters can each choose a representative who best reflects their own views. Between 2 and 7 current ridings will be merged to create these districts – 2 or 3 in the more rural parts of the province and 4-7 in the more densely populated areas. More than one candidate from each of the major

parties will typically run, so voters will have choice both between parties and between candidates of the same party. To be elected, a candidate needs to win a certain number of votes – one third in a two seat district, one quarter in a three seat district, and so on.

**2. Preferential ballots.** Voters will be able to rank their choices numerically instead of being forced to choose only one. This allows them to vote according to preference and still have their wishes taken into

account even if their top choice does not have enough support to be elected. Voters will be able to rank as few or as many choices as they wish, and will be free to rank choices across party lines.

**3. Partial transfers.** If a candidate receives more votes than they need to be elected, each of their supporters' ballots is partially assigned to this candidate and any balance then goes on to the voter's next choice. This ensures that voters are treated as equally as possible.



## What are some of the benefits of BC-STV?

By electing our MLAs in proportion to the support they earn, we will end up with a much more representative and inclusive legislature. Province-wide, there will be a strong correspondence between the share of votes a party wins and their share of the seats, and smaller parties can win seats if they earn one seat's worth of the popular support in a district (12.5% in a 7 seat district).

All districts across the province will almost certainly have both government and opposition MLAs, so no region can be ignored by the government. There will be no more safe seats – parties will still nominate candidates, but the voters will have the final say. Since each party will need to put forward multiple candidates in each region, they are likely to nominate more diverse slates; this could increase the number of women and visible minorities elected.

The style of governing will also likely change. With more proportional

results, the governing party will not have disproportionate power and will have to drop confrontational stances and instead negotiate with other parties to advance their agenda.

This consensus-based approach to governing has been associated with increased voter satisfaction, especially for voters whose preferred parties lose, as they perceive the outcome to be more fair; policies which better match the positions of the average voter; increased voter turnout; lower levels of

economic inequality; better environmental policy; and equal or better overall economic performance. In short, it appears that better representation generally leads to better governance and indeed to a more just society.

For these reasons, we strongly encourage you to invite your friends and family to consider this referendum question carefully and to vote in favour of the Citizens' Assembly's recommendation: BC-STV.

*For more information, please visit the following websites:*

- BC-STV  
<http://www.stv.ca>
- CITIZENS ASSEMBLY ON ELECTORAL REFORM  
<http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca/public>
- CPJ'S POSITION PAPER ON ELECTORAL REFORM  
<http://www.cpj.ca/en/public-justice-electoral-reform-and-representation>

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**A copy of this brochure can be found online at [www.cpj.ca](http://www.cpj.ca)**

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