



HEALTH SCIENCES ASSOCIATION

The union delivering modern health care

*Submission on the Electoral Reform Process to the
Ministry of Attorney General*

February 28, 2018

Via Email: citizenengagement@gov.bc.ca

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Who we are

The Health Sciences Association of BC (HSA) is a democratic labour union that represents more than 18,000 health science and social service professionals who deliver specialized services at over 250 hospitals and agencies in acute and long-term care, child development centres, community health and social service organizations. HSA is a member union of the BC Federation of Labour and the National Union of Public and General Employees.

Our recommendations

The BC government has a critical opportunity to strengthen democracy in our province. We've learned from previous efforts at electoral reform in BC and beyond that the referendum process and design is important. Below we have outlined our recommendations for a robust electoral reform process.

- 1. Use a two-question ballot for a fall 2018 referendum that does not overlap with the municipal elections:** The first question should be a simple question that asks if people want to maintain BC's first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral process or change to a form of PR. The second question should ask, if a majority vote to change the electoral system to proportional representation, which form of PR would you prefer? This question should offer a list of PR models and allow people to rank their choices with a ranked-ballot transferable vote calculation used to determine the PR option. There are multiple benefits to this approach. Voters have the ability to respond to the general (first) question if they want to keep FPTP or change to PR. The second question builds public trust in the process by ensuring that citizens are aware of the options and are choosing the alternative voting system, not politicians. If voters do not feel strongly about their most-preferred PR model, they can leave the second question blank. However, the first question can be used to determine the referendum threshold of 50%+1.
- 2. Elections BC should be provided with the necessary resources to provide impartial public education** on the various electoral models, in consultation with academic experts. Lack of knowledge of the referendum has hurt turnout previously, therefore we recommend that the public education process start immediately. As part of its efforts, Elections BC should outreach to community organizations, including immigrant and visible minority communities where English may not be the primary language spoken.
- 3. There should be a level playing field and limits on 'big money':** There should be modest public funding to one proponent group (pro-PR) and one opponent group (pro-FPTP). Beyond this public funding, third party referendum-related advertising should be capped at \$100,000 over a three month period leading up to the referendum's closing date. However, third parties should only be required to register once they spend \$5,000 on province-wide advertising or \$1,500 within a single constituency. Limits should be used to effectively target big spenders.
- 4. There should be four PR options on the ballot:** mixed member proportional – open list; single transferable vote; local PR; rural-urban PR. We recommend that only "open list" options be included on the ballot.

5. **Use a citizens' jury to ensure that citizens have a high degree of confidence that political parties are not biasing the referendum process:** The citizens' jury would be made up of volunteers randomly selected from across the province and would be empowered to have final approval of the system and choices/wording of the ballot. If PR is chosen by voters, the group would be reconvened to help with the implementation of the PR option and determine number and allocation of new seats in the Legislature. As deliberative democratic models, citizens' juries are used in many jurisdictions to strengthen democratic institutions and increase public participation in democratic reform processes.

6. **Re-assure voters ahead of the referendum that there will not be a loss of seats or local representation in the Legislature:** This will alleviate common concerns about electoral reform and ensure that voters are not asked to make a decision with uncertainty that they may be uncomfortable with. It will address a common refrain from opponents of PR that it will undermine local representation, even though this may not be true. Specifically, government should 1) indicate that a move to PR would likely necessitate the creation of additional seats, 2) indicate, if PR is chosen, any list-based seats will be regionally composed thereby maintaining regional representation and 3) commit to reconvening a citizens' jury after the referendum to determine if additional seats are needed, and if so, how many. This will inform the work of the independent Electoral Boundaries Commission.

Thank you for considering our recommendations on this important issue.