



Electoral Justice Now!

Liberating Democracy from an unjust electoral system, to better reflect and serve the 'Will of the People'!

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EJN Newsletter #8: **What's different about BC's 3rd Referendum on PR?**

BC's third (and probably final) referendum on Proportional Representation (PR) will be held in Nov. 2018. This was a campaign promise of the NDP, which the Green party demanded to be included in their agreement to support the NDP minority government.

Let's review BC's previous referenda on PR, in comparison with present circumstances—to see what's different and objectively analyze the prospects of a successful outcome.

1. Electoral justification for another referendum on PR:

This is a **major disadvantage**. Most people probably think the BC2017 election showed that our FPTP (First-Past-The-Post) voting system worked fairly well. The election was amazingly close, as Liberals and NDP won almost the same numbers of votes (40.36% to 40.28%) and seats (43 to 41). A government that had become arrogant after 16 years was replaced—by a minority government propped up by the third-party. So most citizens probably don't see a good reason for another referendum—other than it being political payback extracted by the Greens for supporting the NDP. By contrast, the two prior referenda on BC-STV followed elections in which FPTP produced two of the most extreme examples of unfair outcomes. The 1996 election produced the **'wrong' winner**, as the NDP were re-elected with a 'false-majority' (i.e. more than 50% of seats with only 39% of votes)—even though the Liberals had more votes (41%). The 2001 election was a blow-out for the Liberals—winning 77 of 79 seats—producing **a government without an Official Opposition** (required 4 seats), even though 42% voted for opposition candidates.

2. Perceived legitimacy of the referendum process:

This is a **huge disadvantage**. In 2004, the Liberals fulfilled their campaign promise by initiating the BC Citizens' Assembly on electoral reform. The BCCA was a body of 160 randomly selected citizens (one male and one female from each riding), who took about one year to study the issues and alternatives. They were supported by leading political scientists, held many meetings around the province, and received over 1,600 written submissions. They democratically chose BC-STV (Single Transferable Vote) over MMP (Mixed Member Proportional) by a margin of 80% to 20%, and STV over FPTP by 93% to 7%.

This time, by contrast, the NDP held private meetings with the Greens, then introduced enabling legislation for the 2018 referendum on some undetermined form(s) of PR, with an unspecified process that will presumably include some semblance of 'public consultation'. The Attorney General has excluded himself from the process, so that he can 'impartially' evaluate the alternatives and select the question(s) to be presented in the referendum. This process clearly lacks the thoroughness and impartiality of the

BCCA—which so carefully studied and democratically recommended the BC-STV referendum.

3. Referendum threshold.

This is a **major advantage**, as the NDP have democratically set the threshold for adoption as a simple majority (i.e. 50%+1) rather than the previous ‘super majority’ that the Liberals arbitrarily set at 60% (plus the requirement of a majority in 60% of the ridings).

The BC-STV referendum of 2005 was a democratic victory with 57.8% support—which was essentially ‘stolen’ from the people by the Liberal government’s undemocratic requirement of 60%. [Then, as now, the Liberals wanted to avoid electoral reform—given that FPTP usually works to their great advantage—routinely producing ‘false majority’ governments with much less than 50% vote-share.]

The BC-STV referendum of 2009 was a crushing defeat with only 39% support. By then the outstanding work of the BCCA was a distant memory, and the referendum question was intentionally changed to favour the status quo.

Hence, the 50% threshold will be far from easy—especially with public suspicions and perception of the dubious legitimacy of the process.

4. Other ER studies and referenda.

In 2007, Ontario held a referendum on MMP, which was supported by only 36.8%.

In 2016, the federal Liberal government established a balanced all-party committee (ERRE) to study electoral reform. It held meetings across the country, received a large number of submissions, and considered the testimony of many expert witnesses.

It also conducted a national survey, and unsurprisingly found a very low level of knowledge and interest by the general public. When the ERRE Committee stalled at the deliberation stage due to intransigent partisan positions, the PM unilaterally aborted the process—claiming that there was no consensus. In fact the vast majority of submissions advocated some form of PR.

While ER advocates were outraged by the PM’s betrayal of a key campaign promise, there was very little reaction by the public at large.

The broad history of recent electoral reform initiatives would appear to reflect a pervasive lack of public concern—perhaps now even a general fatigue with the issue.

So **public support for another PR referendum is doubtful**—probably less than before.

5. The mail-in ballot vs general election; participation.

The two referenda on BC-STV were held in conjunction with a provincial election, ensuring a good turnout.

By contrast, the BC2018 referendum on PR will be held by mail-in ballot, which will probably have much lower voter participation—hence a different voter demographic. Whether this will be an **advantage or disadvantage to PR is unclear** at this time.

There's also a potential question of public acceptability of changing the electoral system if the turnout is low—especially with such a dubious and partisan process.

6. Political appearances and politicization of PR.

This is a **huge disadvantage**. Previous PR referenda followed substantial public consultation in an open and politically neutral process—with no appearance of any political partisanship.

By contrast, BC2018 will be the first PR referendum hobbled by inadequate public consultation, dubious pretense of neutrality, obvious political partisanship, and politicization of the entire process. This will be ugly.

Previous PR referendum campaigns have been officially non-partisan, and none of the parties have openly engaged in the process. Covertly, the backroom boys of the major parties have master-minded the NO campaigns—intent on preserving the status quo, given that FPTP distortions have been the basis of their unchecked power in 'false majority' governments. The YES campaigns have been ineffectively led by political amateurs—advocates of PR.

The BC2018 referendum will be openly campaigned by each party—the NDP and Greens aligned with the YES campaign—the Liberals spearheading the NO campaign. The Liberals and their allies have already started the NO campaign. The Liberal leadership campaigns are rallying their troops to fight against PR. The Liberals will surely mount a massive campaign to get out their mail-in ballot votes.

Presumably the NDP and Greens will also engage to the max. But the outcome will probably be determined by how well each party gets out their votes. There may also be a question about how united NDP supporters are about PR this time—as many of them played a major role in defeating BC-STV.

7. Public acceptance of STV and MMP?

This **should be a major concern**. After STV was crushed (39%) in BC in 2009, and MMP crushed (36.8%) in Ontario in 2007—each being the recommendation of a neutral Citizens' Assembly, how much realistic hope should there be that *either* of them would receive majority support in the highly partisan and politicized process of BC2018?

STV almost certainly isn't a viable alternative in BC. It was too complex for most voters, and too easy for the NO campaign to defeat. Also, no party likes it (but it's still a preferred choice of most PR advocates). Given that it was so badly defeated when it had the benefit of respect as the BCCA's recommendation, it almost certainly couldn't win this time—with many voters distrustful of politicians and suspicious of the partisan process.

The NDP and Greens have both hinted a preference for MMP—even though it was clobbered in Ontario 2007 (even with the legitimacy of their Citizens' Assembly). Needing some combination of either 50% more seats or 50% larger ridings is an enormous impact and cost—which becomes a big fat target for the NO campaign, and a huge barrier to public approval.

Other new electoral system alternatives (e.g. LocalPR and Rural-Urban PR) are hybrid derivatives that provide worthy improvements on defects of STV and/or MMP—but they suffer the same vulnerabilities to the NO campaign.

Hence, there are major questions about the viability of *any* of the seat-based PR alternatives to withstand the well-proven effectiveness of the NO campaigns focused on their vulnerabilities—especially in an adverse political climate of public distrust.

8. Liberals are united in fierce opposition to any form of PR.

- Accusing NDP of ‘selling out’ to Greens to be in power (tail wagging dog)
- Accusing NDP-Greens of operating in secret
- Accusing NDP of rigging the referendum to give themselves more power and control (linking this to the NDP’s extension of term by 6 mo.)
- Exploiting the rural-urban divide (claiming PR would be unfair to rural citizens)
- Fear-mongering about instability of minority govt, radical parties that might hold the balance of power, the world-wide rise of ultra-right parties etc.

9. Why would “PracticalPR” and “Core-PPR” have a better chance to win?

- PPR and Core-PPR are based on the simple *principle* that every Citizen’s vote should always be equal, always be counted—and counted with every vote in the legislature!
- Much easier for the people to understand—and produces perfect PR—without the complexities and problems of other PR systems.
- Much less vulnerable to attacks by the NO campaign—which would be forced to argue why the people should *not* have an electoral system that always makes every vote count equally.
- Core-PPR can be implemented with the same ridings, the same voting system, no costs and no risks!

The BC2018 referendum, on whatever form of PR is chosen by the NDP, will face major handicaps that BC-STV didn’t have. The process chosen by this government doesn’t have the perceived legitimacy and goodwill of the BCCA. By contrast, the highly partisan political spectacle will be a very negative and confusing experience for many voters. At this point, prospects of winning the referendum seem doubtful.

PR advocates are facing a moment of truth. We’re on a losing track. We’re carrying a losing record, playing a losing hand under new handicaps, pursuing the same strategy that has proven to fail, time after time.

Without a new and better alternative, and a new and better campaign strategy, the sad history of prior failures to achieve PR seems most likely to be repeated.

Fortunately, that better alternative and better campaign strategy have presented themselves: **PracticalPR's "Core-PPR" and *Electoral Justice Now!* (EJN)**

Unfortunately, the same electoral reform advocacy groups with the same rigid thinking still dominate—with their same old pseudo-PR alternatives and same old failed strategies. And so far they have ignored PracticalPR and have not recognized EJN as a partner advocacy organization—even though they profess a commitment to work with all allies committed to the struggle for PR.

We should also recognize that this opportunity to achieve PR is highly exceptional—and sure to produce exceptional consequences—either positive or negative.

If Core-PPR is adopted, it would place great pressure on the federal government to also adopt it—in fulfillment of their abandoned promise of electoral reform. It would almost certainly spread to other provinces and other countries. BC would become the exemplar for electoral reform in Canada, and Canada would become the model for the world!

But another failure to win PR would also likely have widespread and lasting consequences. It would probably kill the chances of another PR initiative in Canada for a generation or more. BC would remain stuck with FPTP and its two-party system. The Greens would be indefinitely relegated to the spoiler role of a third-party—with no possibility of political significance. The NDP and Greens would be blamed for dragging BC through another futile and divisive referendum campaign for the sole purpose of their partisan political advantages—especially being blamed for the 'Green tail wagging the NDP dog'. The NDP would be blamed for 'selling-out' to the Greens in their power grab after a close election that they didn't win. The Liberals would probably resume as the natural governing party for another three or four elections, until they become overly arrogant and abuse the public trust again.

From this analysis, it ought to be clear that the PR advocacy organizations and the BC government bear enormous responsibilities leading up to this referendum—with their very futures riding upon the outcome. It's time for them all to stop pretending and to stop deluding themselves—and for the first time to focus on doing what's truly best for Democracy, for the People, and also for their own positions in history.

{Refer to "[Announcing PracticalPR](#)" for more details.}