

# Frequently Asked Questions About The Referendum - From the B.C. Referendum Information Office

## **1. How do I vote in the referendum?**

Voting in the referendum takes place at the same time and place as voting in the provincial general election. Referendum ballots will be provided at the same time as election ballots. You must be a registered voter to vote in the referendum. For more information on voting or voter registration, visit [Elections BC](#).

## **2. Why are we having this referendum now?**

In May 2005, British Columbians voted in a referendum on whether to adopt BC-STV, a form of the single transferable vote electoral system proposed by the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform. The result in 2005 was that BC-STV narrowly missed reaching the approval threshold. Results of the 2005 referendum can be viewed in the [report of the Chief Electoral Officer](#).

Following the 2005 referendum, it became clear that many voters did not feel fully informed about BC-STV and First-Past-the-Post. The provincial government made a commitment in September 2005 to hold a second referendum on the same subject. To help ensure voters are better informed in 2009, government:

- Is making \$1 million in funding available to registered proponent and opponent groups to conduct public information campaigns;
- Is re-establishing the Referendum Information Office, with a mandate to provide neutral information to voters;
- Directed the Electoral Boundaries Commission to recommend electoral district boundaries under BC-STV so that voters can see how their electoral districts would change if BC-STV is adopted. The electoral map under BC-STV and First-Past-the-Post can be viewed [here](#).

## **3. What level of approval is needed for BC-STV to be adopted as our voting system?**

The approval threshold is set in the *Electoral Reform Referendum 2009 Act*. It is the same threshold as in 2005:

- At least 60% of the total votes province-wide, **and**
- More than 50% of the votes in at least 51 of the province's 85 electoral districts.

Both of these thresholds must be met for BC-STV to be implemented.

## **4. Why is this level of approval needed?**

When embarking on this process in 2003 with the appointment of the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, the provincial government decided that to change our electoral system would be a major shift in how our democracy functions, so a relatively high level of approval should apply. This level requires more than a bare majority, and it requires approval in different regions of the province.

## **5. Is anything different from the 2005 referendum?**

The wording of the referendum question has changed. However, the decision for B.C. voters is the same: whether to adopt the BC-STV electoral system or keep the current First-Past-the-Post system. Everything else, including the approval levels required for BC-STV to be adopted, is the same as in 2005.

**6. Why is the BC-STV system the option for voters?**

Following the 2001 election, the government created a Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform to consider all possible models for electing MLAs. The Assembly was an independent group of citizens who were selected at random from the voters' list and asked if they wished to be a member of the Assembly.

When it created the Citizens' Assembly, government also announced that if the Assembly recommended a different voting system from our current system, that question would be put to all voters in a province-wide referendum at the same time as the May 2005 election. The Citizens' Assembly proposed BC-STV, a form of the single transferable vote electoral system, and that system is the one that British Columbians will be voting on in May 2009.

**7. If BC-STV is approved, when would it be implemented?**

It would be in place for the next scheduled provincial general election in May 2013.

**8. What is the government's position on the referendum question?**

The September 2005 Throne Speech committed the provincial government and the Premier to remaining neutral on this question. However, individual Members of the Legislative Assembly may express their own opinions on the referendum.

**9. Is the Referendum Information Office affiliated with the proponent and opponent groups or the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform?**

No. The Referendum Information Office has been created within the Ministry of Attorney General with a mandate to provide neutral information to voters about the proposed BC-STV system and the current First-Past-the-Post electoral system. The registered proponent group and opponent group are independent of government. They are being provided with public funding to conduct information campaigns to support and oppose BC-STV. The Citizens' Assembly completed its work with the release of its report in December 2004.

**10. What if I want to get involved and sponsor referendum advertising?**

Referendum advertising sponsors must be registered with Election BC, the independent office of the Legislature responsible for administering the electoral process in British Columbia. There are no spending limits on referendum advertising, but sponsors must register even if the referendum advertising they are conducting does not cost any money.

Additional information on registering as a referendum advertising sponsor can be viewed on the [Elections BC website](#).

**Frequently Asked Questions About First-Past-the-Post and BC-STV**

**1. How many candidates would I have to vote for on a ballot under BC-STV?**

For a ballot to be considered valid, at least a first preference would need to be indicated. After that, voters could rank as many candidates as they choose to support. Voters would not be required to vote for all candidates on the ballot.

**2. Do all my choices count equally under BC-STV?**

Everybody's first choices would be counted at full value and assigned to candidates. After that, if a further choice is transferred from a candidate who is being dropped from the ballot, that choice is counted at the value it had when it was transferred to the candidate who is dropped. Transfers from candidates who have been elected and have a surplus of votes are transferred at a fractional value. How much that "transfer value" is worth depends upon the size of the surplus.

**3. When do my second, third, etc. choices get counted?**

It depends on what happens to your first-choice candidate. Your vote gets transferred to your second choice after your first choice either gets elected with a surplus of votes or receives the fewest votes and is dropped from the ballot. Further choices are activated in the same way.

**4. Why is the vote-counting so complicated under BC-STV?**

The Single Transferable Vote system is designed to have votes contribute, as far as possible, to electing candidates. To achieve this, it is necessary to have a mechanism for transferring votes, and portions of votes, from candidates who are elected and have a surplus of votes and from candidates who have received the fewest votes and are dropped from the ballot.

**5. Would all this vote-counting be done by hand or by computer?**

Elections BC, the independent office responsible for administering elections in the province, would decide the best method for counting the votes. Counting BC-STV votes by hand would take a long time, so it is possible that computers would be used to tabulate results.

**6. Would we be voting using computers or paper ballots?**

Paper ballots likely would still be used. Elections BC would decide on the best method for administering the voting.

**7. If several MLAs get elected in a district under BC-STV, which one would be my MLA?**

They all would be. Under BC-STV, each MLA would be responsible for representing all of the constituents in his or her electoral district. If you were in need of assistance from an MLA, you could choose which MLA you wished to help you.

**8. Does First-Past-the-Post always give disproportional election results?**

First-Past-the-Post is not designed to ensure that political parties' share of seats match their share of the popular vote - there is often a wide variance between the two. Sometimes, however, it produces results that are fairly close to proportional.

**9. Under BC-STV, would political parties' share of seats always be exactly proportional to the popular vote they receive?**

BC-STV would deliver largely proportional results but there could be some variance. As a general rule, the results in each electoral district become more proportional as the district magnitude increases. In some districts that elect two or three members the results may not be strictly proportional, and this could have an effect on the overall results.

**10. What's the difference between majority, minority and coalition governments?**

A majority government is when a single party wins more than 50% of the seats; assuming its caucus members vote in support of their own party, it does not need to worry about losing votes in the Legislative Assembly.

A minority government exists when no one party has a majority of seats. In order to pass legislation and other measures, that government needs the support of at least some members of other parties in the House.

A coalition government is when two or more parties join together in some kind of formal alliance. This usually involves negotiating compromises in their positions on some public issues. A coalition government typically will have cabinet ministers appointed from both parties. Assuming the two parties comprise a majority of seats in the House, the coalition can function in the same manner as a majority government.

**11. Does First-Past-the-Post always give us majority governments?**

First-Past-the-Post does not always result in majority governments, but they are usually what happens in British Columbia. Majority governments become very likely when elections are contested between two dominant political parties.

**12. Would there always be minority governments under BC-STV?**

Not necessarily. Although BC-STV, like other proportional systems, makes it less likely that any single party would win a majority of seats in the Legislative Assembly, it could still happen. It would depend on a number of factors, like how many political parties and candidates are competitive in the election. To win a majority under BC-STV, a party likely would need to win a majority of the popular vote, or close to it.

**13. What would BC-STV cost?**

Elections BC is the independent office responsible for administering elections in British Columbia. The information we have received from them is that, at this time, they cannot attach specific costs to administering BC-STV elections.

The major costs associated with running a provincial election are related to voting place rentals and staffing, registering voters, printing and mailing information material, and advertising. Most of these costs would remain fixed regardless of the type of voting system used.

Under BC-STV, some cost savings may result from having fewer electoral districts. On the other hand, some added investment in technology would be probably be needed, such as buying or renting specialized computers and software to tabulate the voting results.

**14. How would by-elections work under BC-STV?**

If a single vacancy needed to be filled in an electoral district, voters would rank their choices and a process of transferring votes would occur. The quota would be 50%+1 of the overall vote.

If there is more than one vacancy to be filled at a by-election, then voting and vote-counting would take place in the same manner as at a general election.

**15. Where is First-Past-the-Post used now?**

First-Past-the-Post is used in a number of Commonwealth countries including Canada, the United Kingdom, and India. It is also used in the United States and a number of African, Caribbean and Pacific island countries. For an overview of the different electoral systems used around the world, visit the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

**16. Where is the Single Transferable Vote system used now?**

STV is used in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, Malta, and in Australia for Senate elections as well as some state elections. It is also used in Scotland for local elections. For an overview of the different electoral systems used around the world, visit the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.