

Why change?

We currently use a “first-past-the-post” system where only the candidate representing the largest block of voters wins. Candidates from one party can sweep a whole region even if a majority of voters choose other parties. Smaller parties and independents are shut out entirely. Parties often win 60% of the seats with 40% of the votes. At best only half of voters get representation and because parties run head to head for each seat, elections are often negative and politics are centralized.

Who recommended change?

Created by unanimous vote of the legislature, the BC Citizens’ Assembly – a group of 160 ordinary citizens chosen randomly – met for a year in 2004, and considered many possible voting systems. After extensive public consultations – they finally chose BC-STV by a wide margin.

What is BC-STV?

‘STV’ stands for Single Transferable Vote and is a way to elect MLAs (provincial politicians). The MLAs for a region are elected together in a multi-MLA district and each voter casts a ‘single’ vote. Each voter lists their preferences. Votes are counted in rounds, if your first-choice candidate is not elected, your vote isn’t lost, but can be ‘transferred’ to another candidate you like. Most voters get a representative they voted for.

Will it be simple to vote?

Voting is as easy as 1,2,3 – just rank your favourite candidates. You only need to vote for one, but can choose more to ensure that more of your vote gets counted.

How big are the new regions?

Most districts will elect 4 or 5 MLAs, but a few have as many as 7 or as few as 2 depending on population density. As today, the districts maintain a principle of representation by population – each MLA will represent about 50,000 people.

Who determines the riding size?

An independent Boundaries Commission meets after every second election to determine the riding sizes. Their report is at www.BC-EBC.ca

How many votes are needed to get elected?

In a 2-seat district, a candidate will need 1/3 of the total votes cast. In a 3-seat district, a candidate will need 1/4 of the votes. This is known as the “quota”. Regardless of district size, a candidate will need around 20,000 votes. Candidates can get elected by 1st choice votes or votes transferred from other candidates.

Which votes get transferred?

Mostly, votes are transferred when least popular candidates are eliminated, and a voter’s ballot goes towards their second preference instead of their first. A smaller number of votes are transferred when candidates go ‘over quota’ – get more votes than needed. In this case, the unused portion of each ballot is transferred to a voter’s next choice.

Does counting require a computer?

No – STV is much older than computers, and hand-counts were still done until recently. Today, computers can help us tally paper ballots quickly and are used for all sorts of voting systems. The ballots can be manually recounted to ensure the count is accurate.

Does BC-STV give fair results?

Yes. In Ireland where STV has been used since 1922, the share of seats a party gets is usually within 5% of the number of votes a party receives.

STV also encourages parties to run more diverse candidates. STV allows younger voters or minorities to pool their votes to elect a candidate that represents them. Parties will need to work to attract these voters.

This results in a legislature that better represents the population.

Getting Involved

Visit www.stv.ca to learn more about BC-STV. Groups can visit stv.ca/speaker to request a speaker.

Does every vote count?

It is impossible to guarantee every voter gets to elect a representative they want, but BC-STV comes close. Currently only 50% of voters choose a winning candidate. Under BC-STV, about 90% of voters will see one of their choices elected.

Can independents and smaller parties get elected?

BC-STV makes it easier for popular independent and small-party candidates to win seats because it accurately translates votes into seats. Popular local candidates and community activists who earn support across the spectrum are often successful.

Will BC get minority governments?

STV delivers the government people vote for. Given our voting history, this would likely be one or two party (coalition) majority governments. In coalitions, parties choose their partners wisely and the voters often know the partners prior to an election. Parties that work together are rewarded by voters.

Are there other benefits?

Voters get more choices to find the candidate they most agree with, without worrying about wasting their vote. This shifts some control from political parties to the voters. In almost every district, voters will have representatives from both the government and the opposition to turn to – which is not the case in many regions today. This results in more balanced government.

Other benefits to BC-STV may include less negative campaigns. It will be more important for candidates to reach out to supporters of other candidates and parties.

Myth: STV is too complicated for voters to select candidates.

Fact: Voters only need to put a '1' beside their first choice and may rank additional choices if they wish.

Myth: Voters won't know where their votes went.

Fact: Your vote can only be transferred to candidates you chose on your ballot. Elections officials publish results showing how votes were transferred. You can see exactly how much of your vote went to your first choice (usually most) and how much, if any, was transferred to your next preference.

Myth: STV makes politicians less accountable.

Fact: STV increases accountability. Our current system allows voters limited choice between candidates. BC-STV improves competition by allowing voters to switch their vote to another candidate from their party or a smaller party. The presence of viable alternatives creates greater incentives for accountability.

Myth: STV is worse for women.

Fact: The potential for the election of women is far higher. Our current system places barriers for women seeking a party nomination. Under BC-STV, parties nominate several candidates - they can balance their slates to attract more voters. In Australia, women do much better in the elections that use STV than in winner-takes-all elections.

Myth: Voters would have to rank dozens of candidates.

Fact: In some votes in Australia there is a requirement to rank all candidates, but in BC a voter could rank as few as one. Voters could rank 2 or 3 candidates from one political party or vote across party lines if they wish -- whatever they choose.

Myth: BC used STV in 1952 and it created problems.

Fact: BC used a ranked ballot, but not STV. The results were not fair and two parties still dominated the election.

Myth: STV is not proportional.

Fact: BC-STV was designed to give fair results and local representation. That makes it the best form of proportional representation to match our system of government -- for many years, the term 'proportional representation' simply meant STV in most English-speaking countries.

Myth: STV is used in Israel & Italy.

Fact: Israel and Italy have completely different systems. Voters choose party lists and extreme fringe parties only require 2-4% of overall votes to get in. BC-STV is a stable system where each candidate is directly elected, accountable to voters and needs significant local support to be elected.

Myth: STV will elect fringe parties and candidates.

Fact: With BC-STV, each candidate will still need moderate community support (slightly more votes than they need now), but they can get them from across a larger voting district.

Myth: STV would result in more elections.

Fact: Ireland and Malta have had fewer elections than either BC or Canada in the last 50 years. BC-STV will result in less wild seat changes, so there is less incentive for a party to gamble on an election.

Myth: STV would not be stable.

Fact: STV is as stable in terms of longevity and more stable in terms of policy formation. This is because legislation will need the support of MLAs representing a majority of the population, thus avoiding dramatic policy shifts that occur when government changes hands.

Myth: STV would create more expensive elections.

Fact: The same parties would still be trying to reach the same voters. So the primary campaign expenses -- office space, staff, mailings, TV and newspaper ads -- would be exactly the same. Independents may need to campaign harder in a 5-seat riding than in a 1-seat riding -- but they would also have a chance of winning.

Where is STV used?

Ireland

Ireland's system is the closest to the BC-STV model. It has a stable government, elects independents and a few small parties.

Australian Senate

Australia uses a less open version of STV, but still elects a number of third parties' candidates.

Australian State of Tasmania

Tasmania has one of the higher percentage of women elected in an English speaking country and uses an open system like BC could.

Malta

Malta is a small island country where only two parties get more than 5% of the votes. However, 94% of voters turnout to vote in Malta.

Scotland

Scotland now uses STV to elect its local government representatives.

Historically

Manitoba and Alberta used STV in urban areas until the late 1950s. It was removed without a referendum.

Myth: BC-STV removes rural seats.

Fact: BC-STV does not change the number of seats per region.

Myth: STV creates giant northern ridings that are too big.

Fact: BC-STV ridings in the North have about the same population and area as a current federal riding -- but with 2 or 3 representatives. Greater competition creates strong incentives for MLAs to be more responsive.

Myth: STV results in no local MLAs.

Fact: Every MLA will be accountable to the voters in his or her district. In Ireland, the MLAs who jointly represent a district often open offices in different parts of the constituency. If a district has more than one population center, voters in each one will tend to support their 'local' candidate, even across party lines, making it likely that each population center will be represented.

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