

Proportional Representation: BC residents split three ways over whether to change voting system

Nationally, most Canadians would prefer PR over FPTP for provincial elections.

September 28, 2018 – With less than a month [before ballots are mailed](#) to voters, British Columbia's 2018 referendum on proportional representation appears to be headed for a tight race.

A pair of new public opinion polls from the Angus Reid Institute find B.C. residents split as to whether they prefer to keep the current, first-past-the-post (FPTP) system or a change to a new system of proportional representation (PR). Significantly, fully one-third of British Columbians are undecided as to how they would vote on this key question.

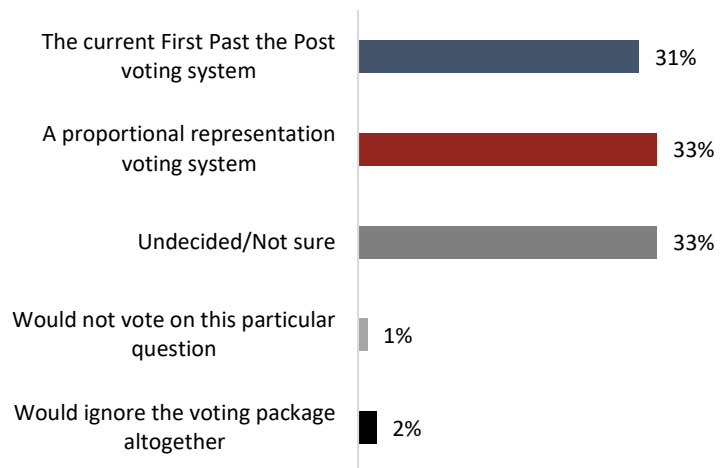
While slightly more B.C. residents choose PR over FPTP, this advantage is well within the margin of error. Moreover, groups that have historically been more likely to vote – including older respondents and those with higher household incomes – are more likely to say they plan to vote for FPTP.

These dynamics drive the months-long campaign, with advocates on both sides having their work cut out to mobilize their bases and convince those on the fence to send in a ballot for their side before the Nov. 30 deadline. This, in contrast to a national landscape in which residents of most provinces prefer a hypothetical change to PR from FPTP when asked to choose between the two in their own provinces

More Key Findings:

- Most British Columbians (61%) believe a system that more closely reflects parties' actual popular support would increase voter turnout, but they're torn on the likely consequence of this: That the province would have more minority governments in the future. Half (48%) don't like this prospect

**Based on how you feel right now, if you were to receive a voting package, which way would you vote on the first question?
(Among B.C. respondents, N=800)**



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from September 10 – 14, 2018, among a representative randomized sample of 800 adult B.C. residents who are members of [Angus Reid Forum](#). ARI also conducted a national online survey from September 11 – 14, 2018, among a representative randomized sample of 1,500 Canadian adults who are Angus Reid Forum members. For comparison purposes only, probability samples of these sizes would carry a margins of error of +/- 3.5 and +/- 2.5 percentage points, respectively, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The surveys were self-commissioned and paid for by ARI. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

CONTACT:

Shachi Kurl, Executive Director: 604.908.1693 shachi.kurl@angusreid.org @shachikurl
Ian Holliday, Research Associate: 604.442.3312 ian.holliday@angusreid.org

- On the second question in B.C.'s referendum, a Mixed-Member Proportional (MMP) system is the clear favourite with twice as many first-choice votes as any other option
- Whether they favour PR or FPTP, Canadians overwhelmingly agree that it's important for a province to have a referendum before making a major change to the voting system (80% agree with this nationally, as do 80% in B.C.)

INDEX:

PART 1 – PR leads slightly, but FPTP base is more solid

- Groups more likely to vote are more likely to prefer FPTP
- Those who prefer FPTP are more certain in their choice
- Is the mailbox a factor?

PART 2 – Views on the referendum itself

- All sides agree referendum is necessary before making a change
- Half see this issue as a low priority

PART 3 – Views on different voting systems

- Many dislike the prospect of more minority governments
- Most say PR would improve turnout
- MMP the clear frontrunner on question 2
- Pleased or upset? How British Columbians view possible referendum outcomes

PART 4 – National perspectives

- Quebec is most supportive of electoral reform

PART 1 – PR leads slightly, but FPTP base is more solid

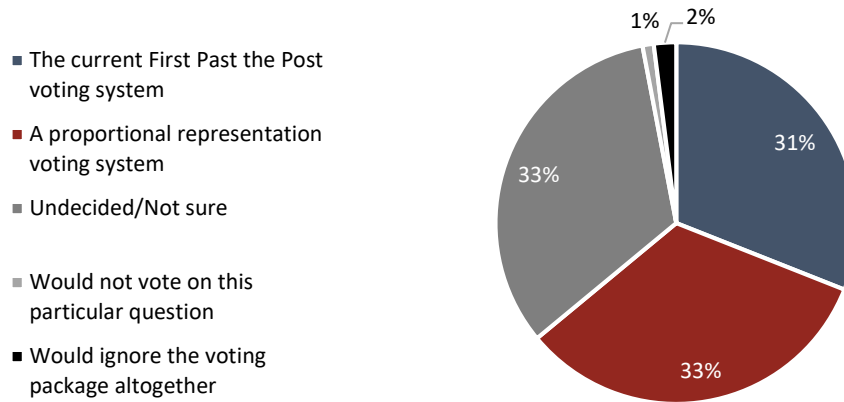
This fall's referendum will be [the third time](#) British Columbians have voted on changing their electoral system since 2005, but the first time a [simple majority](#) of votes is required for the system to change. Previous votes in 2005 and 2009 required more than 60 per cent of votes cast to be in favour of a new system for it to be implemented.

In theory, the lower threshold this time around makes this referendum electoral reform advocates' best chance to achieve success. That said, this poll finds far fewer than a half of British Columbians intending to vote for a change to proportional representation. Some 33 per cent say they will vote for PR, while 31 per cent say they will vote for FPTP, and 33 per cent are undecided.

CONTACT:

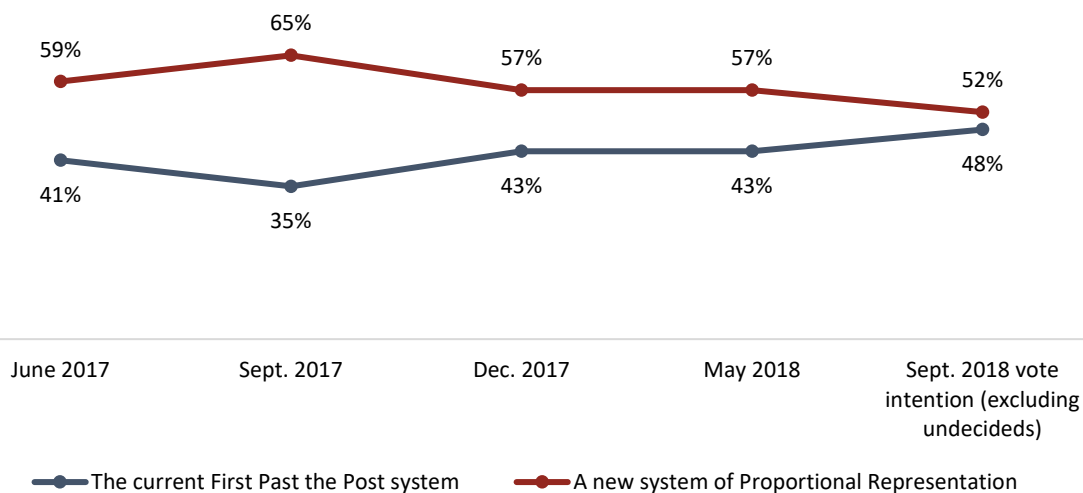
Shachi Kurl, Executive Director: 604.908.1693 shachi.kurl@angusreid.org @shachikurl
Ian Holliday, Research Associate: 604.442.3312 ian.holliday@angusreid.org

Based on how you feel right now, if you were to receive a voting package, which way would you vote on the first question?



In previous ARI polling, when asked a *binary* question about which type of voting system they would prefer, British Columbians have consistently expressed a preference for PR, as seen in the following graph:

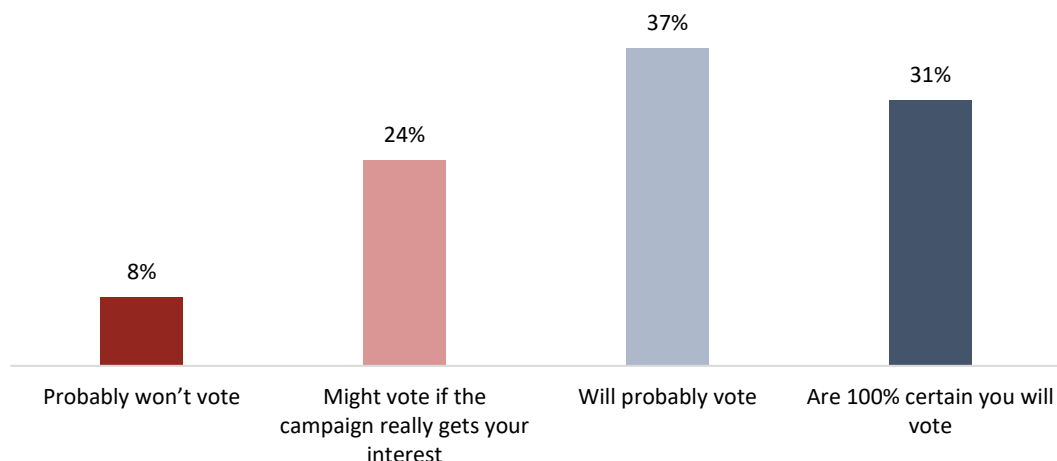
Based on what you know, please indicate which of these two broad options you prefer:



Of course, choosing between two options in a survey is not the same thing as voting in a referendum. When asked about their voting intentions, a significant proportion of B.C. residents say they are unsure which system they would vote for.

Many of those who are currently undecided may not vote, but more than two-thirds say they will either “probably vote” or are “absolutely certain” that they will. How these voters break will be a key factor in determining the referendum’s outcome.

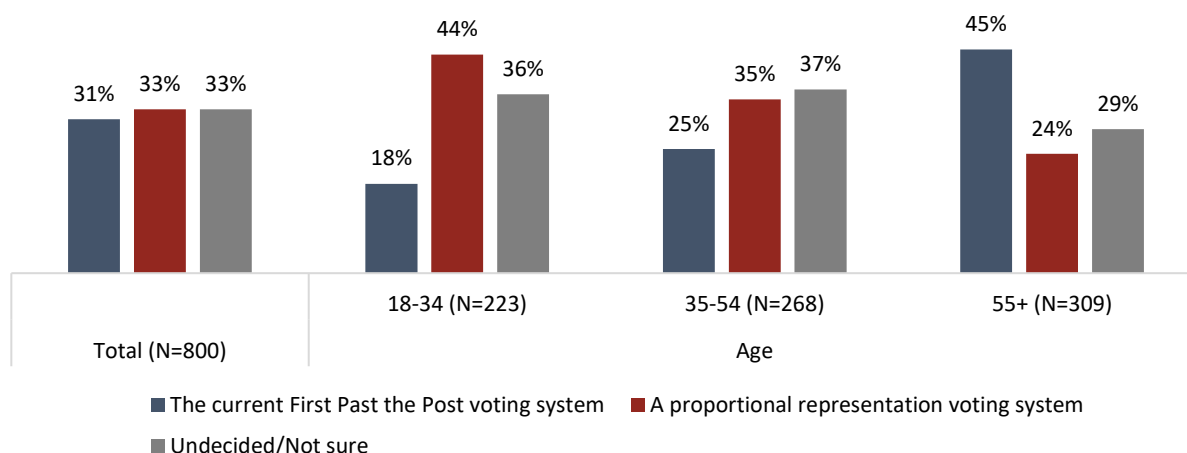
How likely are you to actually vote by completing and mailing back your ballot in time? (Responses from those who are undecided on the first referendum question, N=267)



Groups more likely to vote are more likely to prefer FPTP

There are significant differences in vote intention by age group, with those aged 55 and older – who have historically turned out to vote at higher rates than younger people – preferring FPTP by a wide margin. Younger voters, who have historically had lower turnout rates, prefer PR by more than two-to-one, as seen in the following graph:

Referendum vote intention by age group:

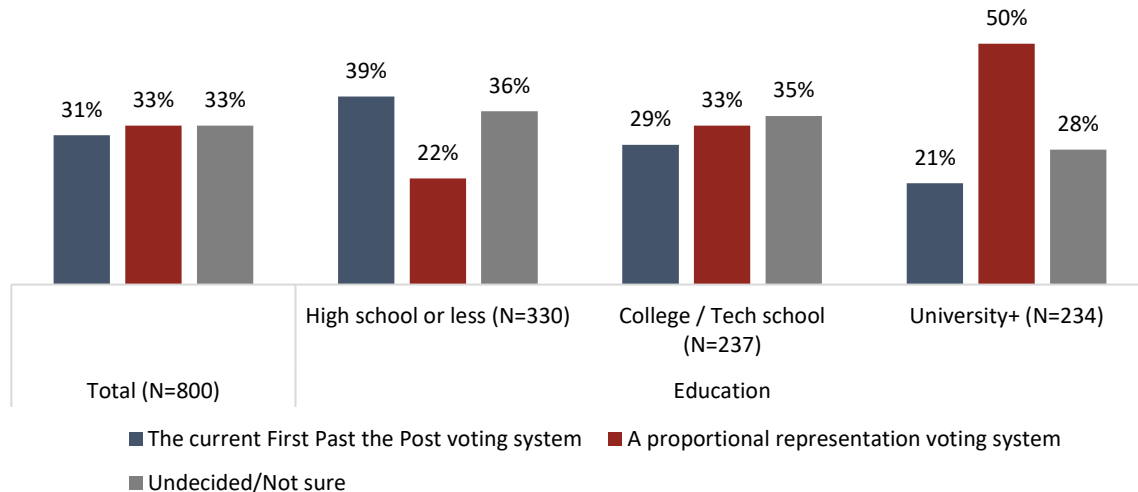


Two other traditional indicators of one's likelihood to vote tell a conflicting story: Those with higher household incomes are more likely to favour FPTP (see comprehensive tables for greater detail), while those with higher levels of educational attainment are more likely to favour PR. Each of these groups has traditionally been more likely to vote than comparable groups.

CONTACT:

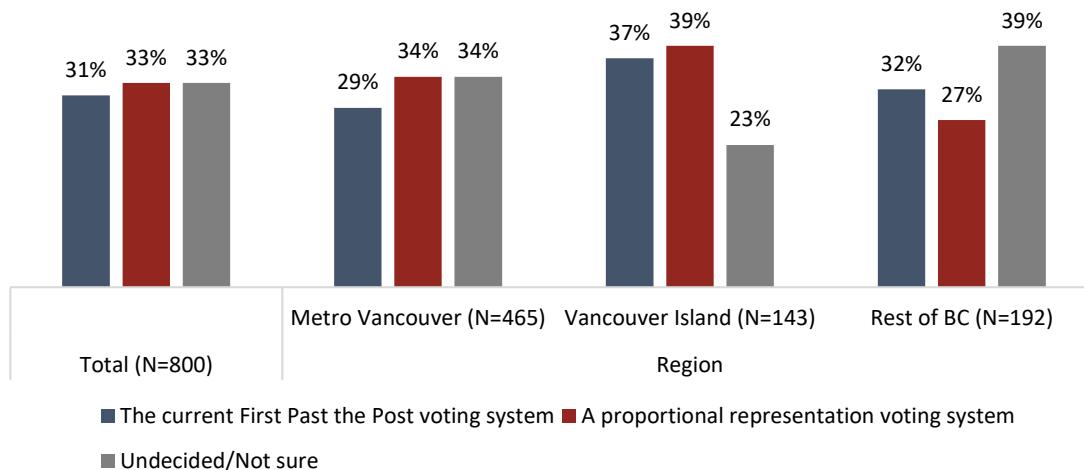
Shachi Kurl, Executive Director: 604.908.1693 shachi.kurl@angusreid.org @shachikurl
 Ian Holliday, Research Associate: 604.442.3312 ian.holliday@angusreid.org

Referendum vote intention by income and education:



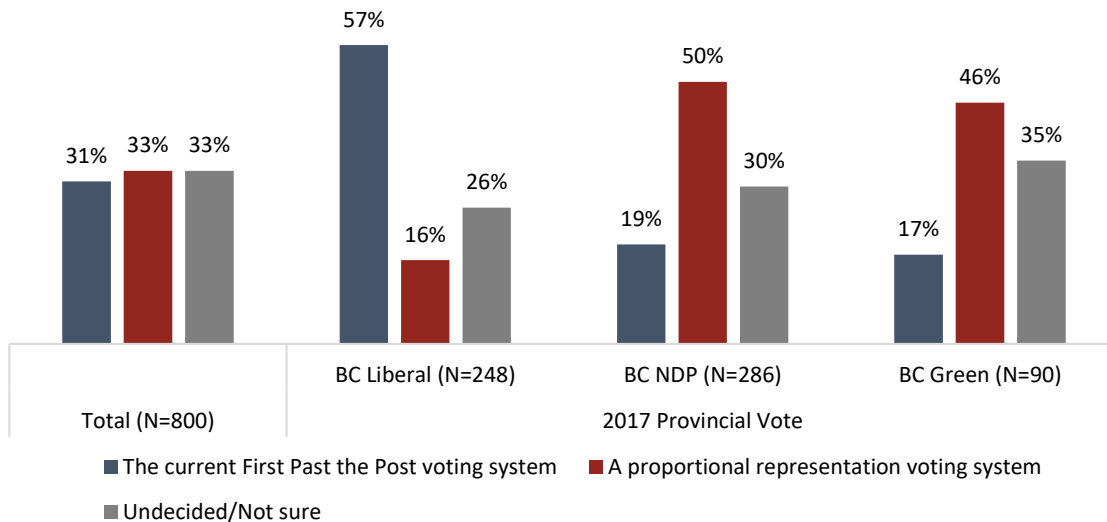
Regionally, vote intentions are less polarized. Support for FPTP is lowest in Metro Vancouver and highest on Vancouver Island, but it only outpaces support for PR elsewhere in B.C., as seen in the following graph:

Referendum vote intention by region:



Perhaps unsurprisingly, those who voted for the governing New Democratic and Green parties in last year’s provincial election are more likely to favour PR (both parties support changing the electoral system). Those who voted for the BC Liberals, meanwhile, prefer FPTP by a wide margin:

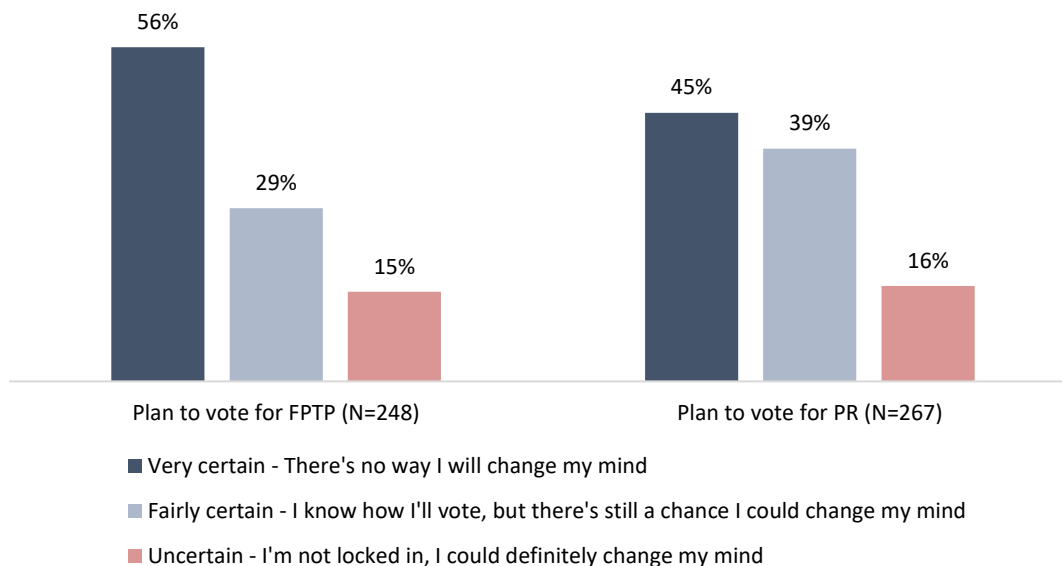
Referendum vote intention by 2017 provincial vote:



Those who prefer FPTP are more certain in their choice

Another potential advantage for FPTP is the fact that its declared supporters are more likely to say they are “very certain” about their choice, while those who currently support PR are less firm. Indeed, a majority of those who intend to vote for the current system (56%) say there is “no way” they will change their minds before the voting period ends, while fewer than half (45%) of those who plan to vote for a new system say the same:

**How certain are you regarding your choice?
(Asked of those who indicate a preference for PR or FPTP, N=514)**



CONTACT:

Shachi Kurl, Executive Director: 604.908.1693 shachi.kurl@angusreid.org @shachikurl
 Ian Holliday, Research Associate: 604.442.3312 ian.holliday@angusreid.org

Is the mailbox a factor?

The recent vote most comparable to this upcoming referendum is the 2015 Metro Vancouver transit plebiscite, which was also conducted by mail ballot. In that campaign, [roughly 49 per cent](#) of registered voters took the time to fill out and mail back their ballots.

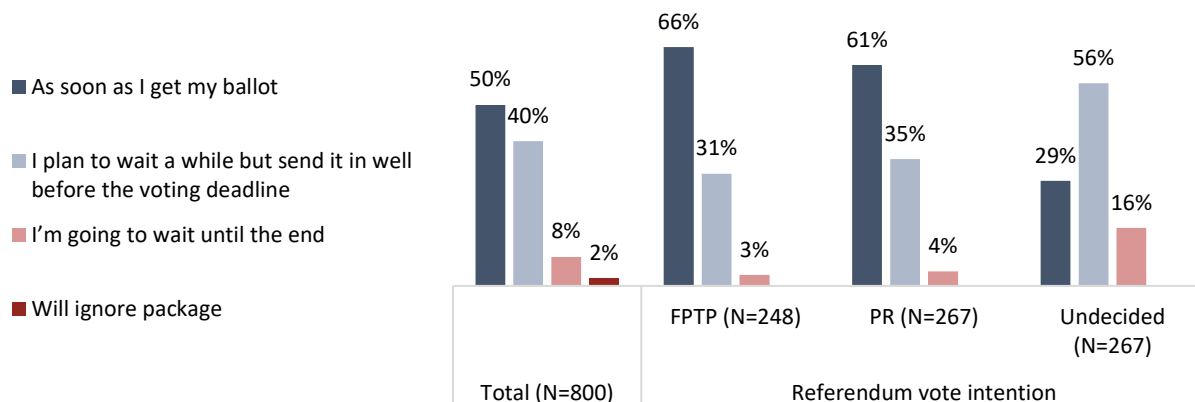
Related – Metro Vancouver transit referendum: Who voted yes, who voted no, and what will it mean for the region?

That total [compares favourably](#) to turnout for the 2014 municipal elections in the region, but [lags behind](#) the 61 per cent provincewide who voted in the general election last year.

What effect, if any, does the way people receive and send mail have on their likelihood to vote or their eventual vote intention?

To start, only 2 per cent of respondents say they will ignore the voting package altogether. The rest offer a variety of perspectives on when they're most likely to fill it out and mail it back. Half (50%) say they will vote as soon as they receive their ballot, but the rest plan to wait at least a little while before sending it in, with those who are undecided most likely to follow this path:

The voting period lasts from Oct. 22 to Nov. 30. When do you think you'll most likely complete and mail in your ballot?



Of course, in order to be able to mail in the ballot, one must receive it in the first place. Those who do not receive their voting packages can [request a replacement](#) one from Elections BC between Oct. 22 and Nov. 23.

In theory, those who check their mail regularly and are familiar with the postal system will find it easier to vote in the referendum, especially if they haven't moved recently. That said, these considerations seem to have minimal effect on vote intention. Those who receive their mail at a central box in their building's lobby are more likely to prefer PR, but this is likely a product of other demographics, such as the fact that younger people – who overwhelmingly support changing the electoral system – are [more likely to be renters](#), and thus more likely to find themselves in a building with multiple suites and a central mailbox area.

The following table summarizes referendum vote intention by one's interactions with mail:

CONTACT:

Shachi Kurl, Executive Director: 604.908.1693 shachi.kurl@angusreid.org @shachikurl
Ilan Holliday, Research Associate: 604.442.3312 ian.holliday@angusreid.org

Based on how you feel right now, if you were to receive a voting package, which way would you vote on the first question?							
	Total (800)	Receive mail ...			Send mail ...		
		Delivered to door (329)	Central box in lobby (224)	Community mailbox (212)	Never / Almost never (239)	Less than once a month (324)	More often (237)
The current First Past the Post voting system	31%	31%	25%	38%	30%	28%	37%
A proportional representation voting system	33%	31%	40%	30%	34%	36%	29%
Undecided/Not sure	33%	37%	31%	29%	32%	34%	34%
Would not vote on this particular question	1%	0%	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%
Would ignore the voting package altogether	2%	1%	3%	2%	3%	1%	1%

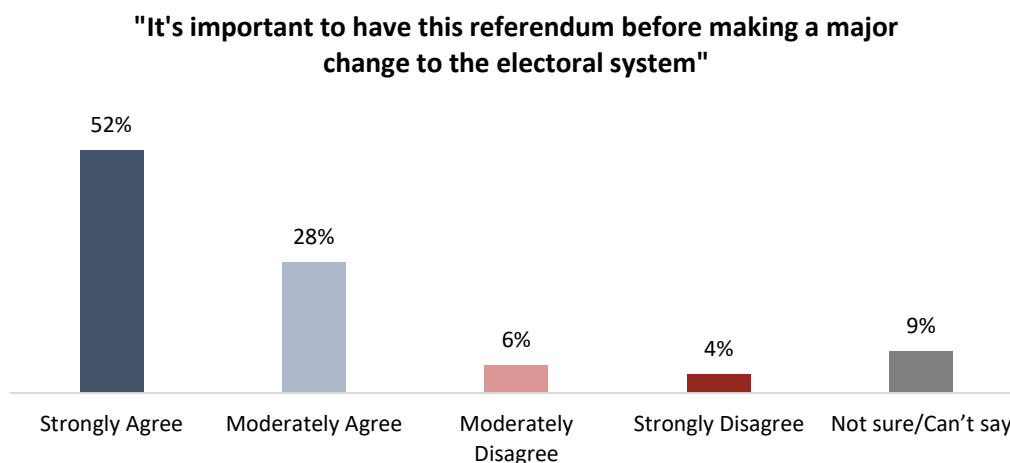
These numbers suggest how one receives mail and how frequently one interacts with the postal service are not significant drivers of opinion on the referendum question.

PART 2 – Views on the referendum itself

All sides agree referendum is necessary before making a change

Since the provincial government announced the referendum framework this spring, numerous articles have been written [explaining the referendum](#), [opining on the questions](#) being asked, and [presenting arguments for and against](#) a change in voting system.

British Columbians have a lot of disagreements about electoral reform as an issue, but they mostly agree that holding a referendum is a necessary step before the province makes any change. Regardless of how – or whether – they plan to vote in this upcoming referendum, the vast majority of respondents agree with a statement to this effect. Indeed, more than half (52%) strongly agree:



CONTACT:

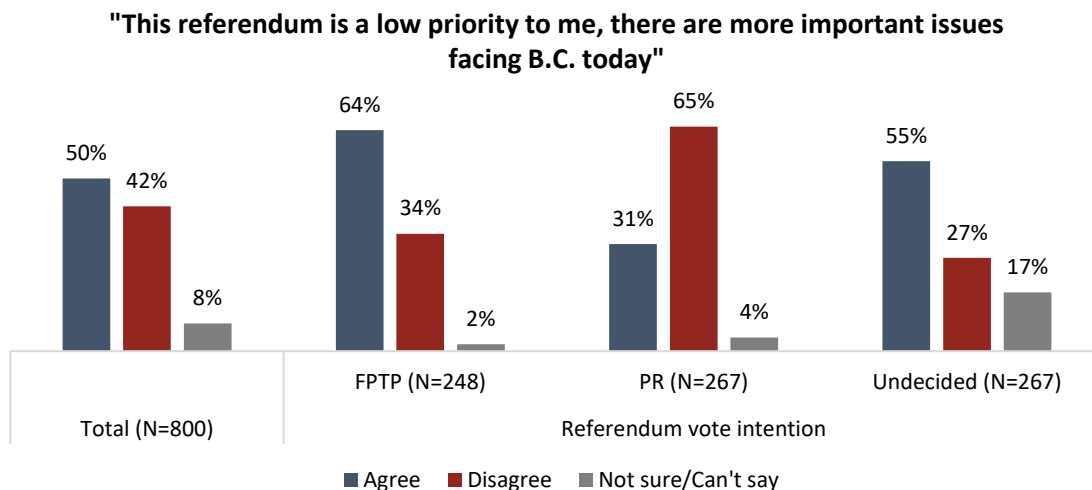
Shachi Kurl, Executive Director: 604.908.1693 shachi.kurl@angusreid.org @shachikurl
 Ian Holliday, Research Associate: 604.442.3312 ian.holliday@angusreid.org

Total agreement with this statement is at least 75 per cent across all three vote intention groups, and it's at least 80 per cent among those who voted for each of the three seat-winning parties in the last provincial election (see [vote intention tables](#) and summary tables at the end of this release)

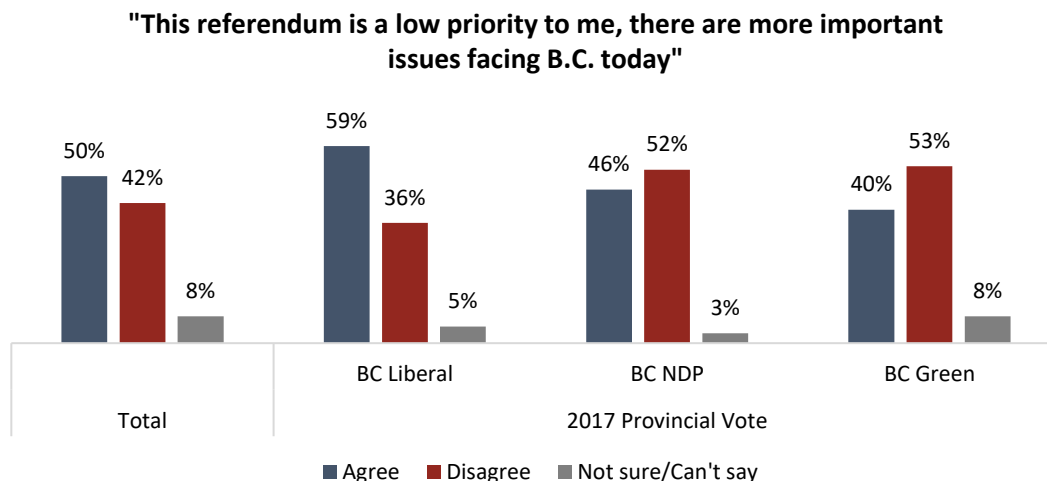
Half in BC see this issue as a low priority

While all sides agree about the necessity of holding a referendum before changing the system, there is a significant divide on whether making a change should be a priority in British Columbia today.

Half (50%) of residents agree with the statement "This referendum is a low priority to me, there are more important issues facing B.C. today." But among those who would vote for a proportional system, a majority disagree with this statement, as seen in the graph that follows:



Notably, past provincial vote also reveals divisions over the importance of this referendum:



CONTACT:

Shachi Kurl, Executive Director: 604.908.1693 shachi.kurl@angusreid.org @shachikurl
 Ian Holliday, Research Associate: 604.442.3312 ian.holliday@angusreid.org

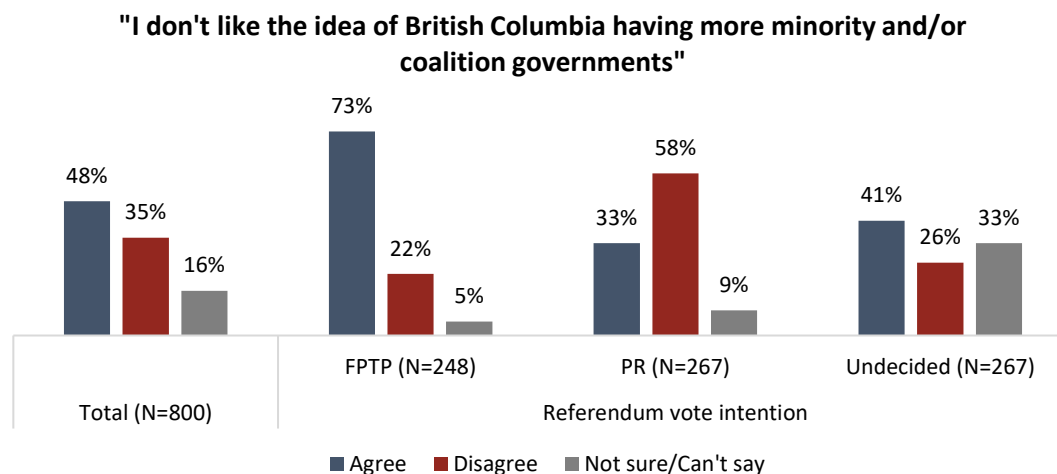
PART 3 – Views on different voting systems

Many dislike the prospect of more minority governments

One of the [most common arguments](#) in favour of keeping the current system is that proportional systems tend to create minority or coalition government more often than they create majority governments. This, FPTP proponents argue, leads to less-stable governments and more frequent elections, as well as governing parties that have difficulty advancing their agendas because of the need to keep small parties happy.

These criticisms appear to resonate with the public. Nearly half (48%) agree with the statement “I don’t like the idea of British Columbia having more minority and/or coalition governments,” while one-in-three (35%) disagree. The rest (16%) are unsure.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, those who favour keeping the current system are most overwhelmingly in agreement with this statement, but it’s worth noting that even one-in-three (33%) who support changing to a proportional system express some trepidation about more minority governments:



Most say PR would improve turnout

For their part, supporters of proportional systems argue that FPTP [discourages people from voting](#) for the party they like best if that party doesn’t have a chance at winning the most votes. They argue that FPTP creates “wasted votes” that don’t actually help elect anyone, and that the prospect of wasting one’s vote keeps people from voting in the first place.

In theory, a proportional system helps to remedy this, because seats are allocated in proportion to the percentage of the popular vote each party receives, meaning fewer votes are “wasted.”

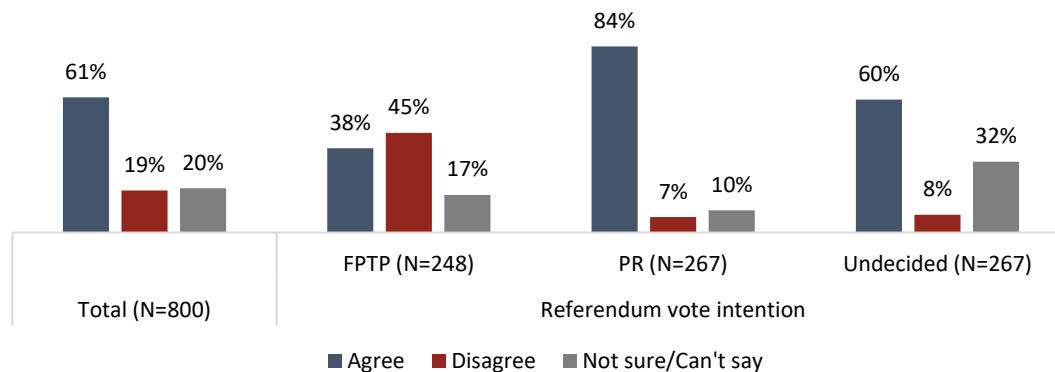
Here, too, the public seems receptive to the advocates’ message. More than six-in-ten (61%) agree that “a system that more closely reflects the parties’ actual popular support would increase voter turnout.” Fewer than one-in-five (19%) disagree, while a similar number (20%) are unsure.

PR supporters are overwhelmingly in agreement with this statement, while those who favour the current system are more skeptical, as seen in the following graph:

CONTACT:

Shachi Kurl, Executive Director: 604.908.1693 shachi.kurl@angusreid.org @shachikurl
Ilan Holliday, Research Associate: 604.442.3312 ilan.holliday@angusreid.org

"A system that more closely reflects the parties' actual popular support would increase voter turnout"



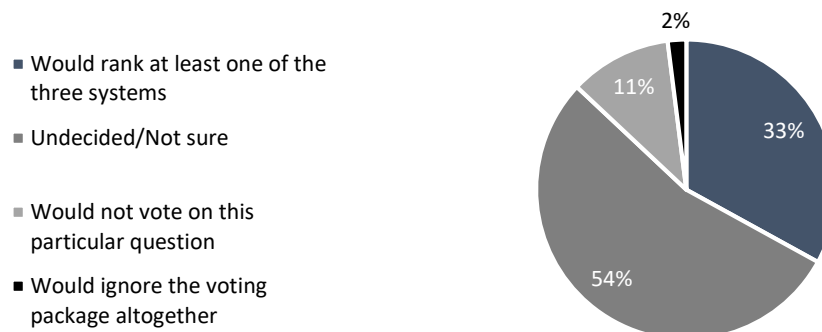
Note that on both of these arguments – that PR would increase turnout and that more minority governments would be a concern – undecided voters are more likely to agree than disagree. This suggests that both sides of the referendum debate have appealing arguments they can make to persuadable voters.

MMP the clear frontrunner on Question 2

If voters opt for a proportional representation in the first question, the system that garners the most support on the second question of the ballot will be adopted for future provincial elections, so it's worth noting the preference British Columbians indicate in this poll.

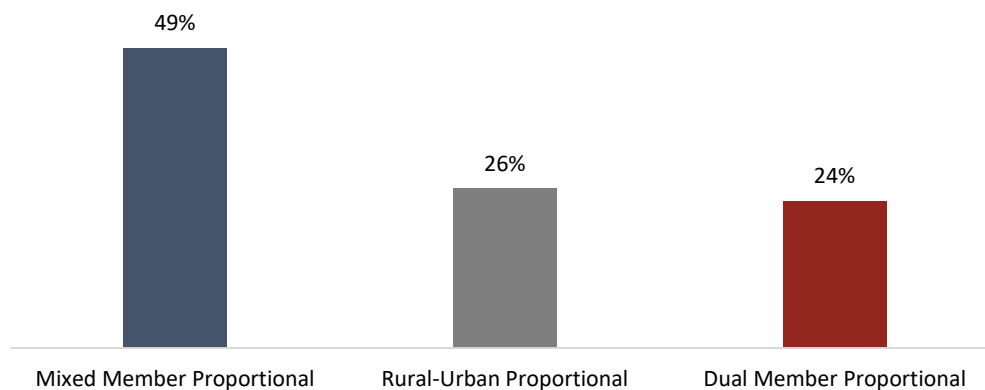
Nearly two-thirds of respondents (65%) say they would either not vote on this question (11%) or are undecided about their preference (54%), as seen in the graph that follows:

Based on how you feel right now, if you were to receive a voting package, how would you vote on this second question?



Among those who do express a preference for one of the systems, MMP is the clear winner. It receives nearly twice as many first-choice votes as either of the other two systems, and is named as the top choice by 49 per cent of those who express an opinion on this question:

**Percentage of first-choice votes for each system
(Among those who expressed a system preference, N=262)**

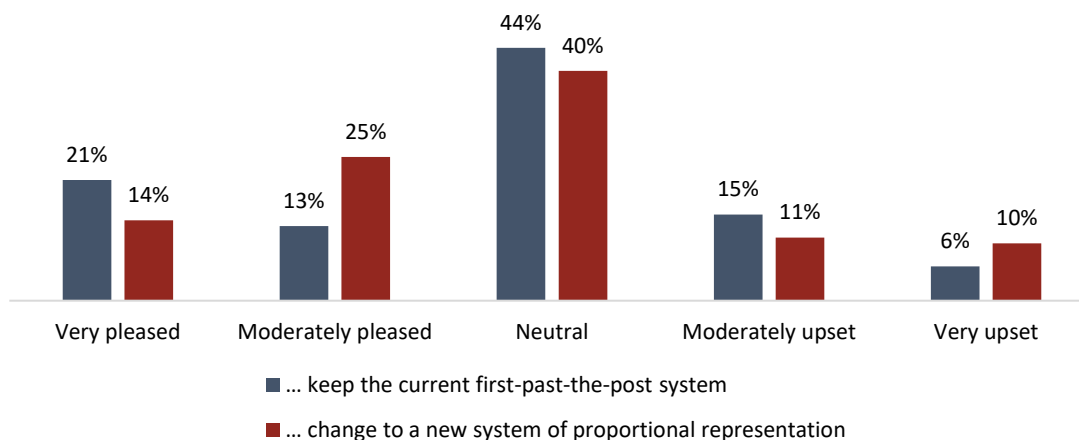


Pleased or upset? How British Columbians view possible referendum outcomes

When asked how they would feel about each of the possible outcomes of the referendum – either a change to a new system or a victory for the status quo – British Columbians express they are inclined to be satisfied either way.

As seen in the following graph, a plurality of respondents say they will feel “neutral” toward either outcome, and more people will be pleased than upset regardless of what happens:

**Suppose B.C. voters choose to ...
If that were the case, would you be:**



CONTACT:

Shachi Kurl, Executive Director: 604.908.1693 shachi.kurl@angusreid.org @shachikurl
 Ian Holliday, Research Associate: 604.442.3312 ian.holliday@angusreid.org

As might be expected, people who choose a side – either PR or FPTP – on the first ballot question are more likely to be pleased with their preferred outcome and upset with the opposite. Undecideds, meanwhile, tend to have neutral feelings about either outcome.

Notably, more than one-in-three who pick a side say they would feel neutral toward a victory by the opposite side, while partisans tend to be overwhelmingly pleased by a hypothetical victory for their own camp. It is this dynamic that creates the larger number of people who would be pleased than upset with each outcome.

Suppose B.C. voters choose to ...				
If that were the case, would you be:				
	Total (800)	Referendum vote intention		
		FPTP (248)	PR (267)	Undecided (267)
... keep the current first-past-the-post system				
Pleased	34%	82%	10%	14%
Neutral	44%	17%	36%	76%
Upset	22%	1%	54%	9%
... change to a new system of proportional representation				
Pleased	39%	6%	83%	26%
Neutral	40%	35%	16%	67%
Upset	21%	59%	1%	6%

PART 4 – National perspectives

Quebec is most supportive of electoral reform

Over the years, several provinces have considered changing their voting system to one that allocates seats more proportionally, and [Ontario](#), B.C., and [Prince Edward Island](#) have held referenda on the issue. So far, however, neither the provinces nor the federal government have switched to a proportional system in the modern era (some provinces used alternative voting systems in the 19th and early 20th centuries).

This fall, London, Ont., will become [the first municipality](#) in Canada to choose its city council using a ranked ballot. Though such a system [does not guarantee proportionality](#), it does ensure that every elected official has the support of at least 50 per cent of his or her constituents.

Ranked ballots are the preferred alternative voting system of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, whose Liberal Party famously promised that the 2015 federal election would be the last one held under FPTP,

CONTACT:

Shachi Kurl, Executive Director: 604.908.1693 shachi.kurl@angusreid.org @shachikurl
Ilan Holliday, Research Associate: 604.442.3312 ian.holliday@angusreid.org

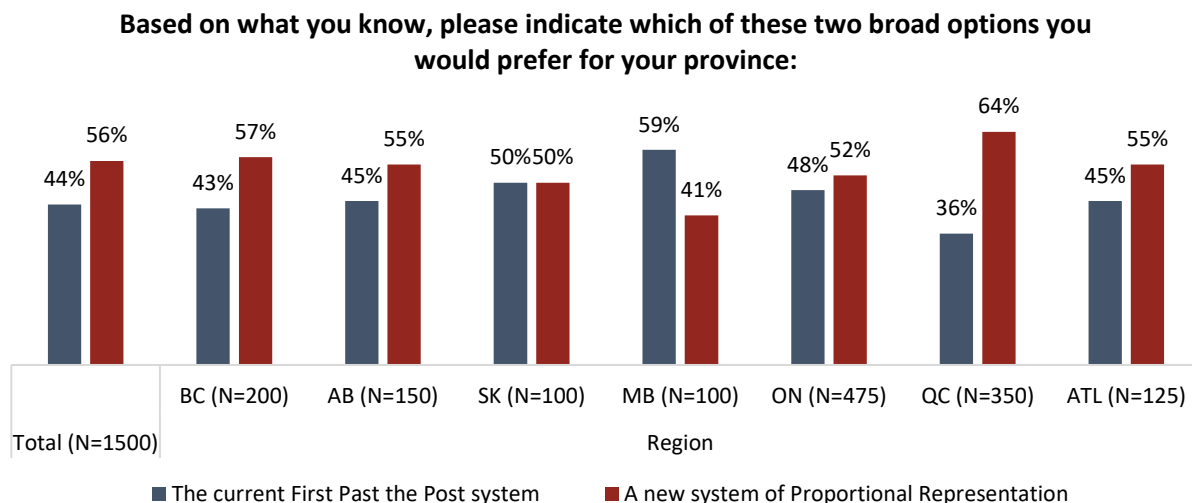
only to abandon that promise after concluding that there was little public appetite for the party's preferred change.

Related – Battle of the Ballots: Two alternate voting systems seen as competitive to First Past the Post

With B.C. putting the PR question to its voters once more, the Angus Reid Institute sought to provide a national context for the debate by asking some basic questions about electoral reform across the country.

Asked whether they would like to see their province keep a first-past-the-post system or change to a proportional one, a small majority of Canadians (56%) prefer the latter.

Quebec – where four parties are currently averaging double-digit support ahead of next week's election – is the province most supportive of a change to a PR system. At the other end of the spectrum, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Ontario express the highest support for keeping FPTP in place:

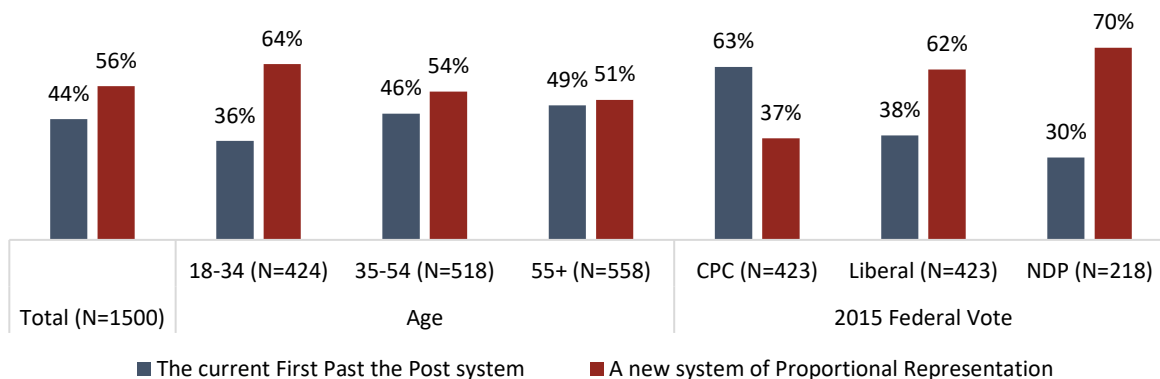


As it is in B.C.'s referendum, age is a key driver of opinion on this issue at the national level, with almost two-thirds (64%) of those under age 35 preferring to see their province change to a PR system, while older respondents are more evenly divided.

Likewise, political partisanship is a huge source of disagreement on this question. Those who voted for the federal Conservative Party in 2015 favour keeping FPTP where they live by a wide margin, while past federal Liberal and New Democratic Party supporters prefer switching to PR.

The support for PR at the provincial level among past Liberal voters is particularly noteworthy in light of Trudeau's abandoned promise of electoral reform at the federal level. Though not a direct repudiation of the federal Liberals' decision, this finding does suggest that most of Trudeau's supporters disagree with him on this issue.

Based on what you know, please indicate which of these two broad options you would prefer for your province:



*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research foundation established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.*

Summary tables follow. For detailed B.C. results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here](#).

For detailed B.C. results by referendum vote intention, [click here](#).

For detailed national results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here](#).

Based on how you feel right now, if you were to receive a voting package, which way would you vote on the first question?							
	Total (800)	Receive mail ...			Send mail ...		
		Delivered to door (329)	Central box in lobby (224)	Community mailbox (212)	Never / Almost never (239)	Less than once a month (324)	More often (237)
The current First Past the Post voting system	31%	31%	25%	38%	30%	28%	37%
A proportional representation voting system	33%	31%	40%	30%	34%	36%	29%
Undecided/Not sure	33%	37%	31%	29%	32%	34%	34%
Would not vote on this particular question	1%	0%	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%
Would ignore the voting package altogether	2%	1%	3%	2%	3%	1%	1%

“It’s important to have this referendum before making a major change to the electoral system”				
	Total (800)	B.C. provincial vote last		
		B.C. Liberal (248)	B.C. NDP (286)	B.C. Green Party (90)
Strongly agree	52%	56%	56%	48%
Moderately agree	28%	25%	29%	31%
Moderately disagree	6%	4%	8%	10%
Strongly disagree	4%	8%	2%	5%
Not sure/Can’t say	9%	7%	5%	5%

“This referendum is a low priority to me, there are more important issues facing B.C. today”				
	Total (800)	B.C. provincial vote last		
		B.C. Liberal (248)	B.C. NDP (286)	B.C. Green Party (90)
Strongly agree	20%	25%	17%	12%
Moderately agree	31%	34%	29%	28%
Moderately disagree	23%	18%	30%	22%
Strongly disagree	19%	17%	22%	31%
Not sure/Can't say	8%	5%	3%	8%