

Electoral Reform Referendum: Voters' motivations, and why proportional representation failed

Four-in-ten say holding this referendum was a good idea, while one-third say it was a bad one

December 20, 2018 – The votes are in, and BC's future general elections will operate much the same as the last ones.

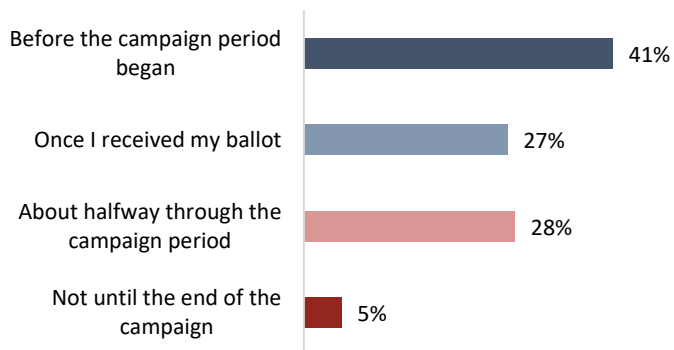
With [news from Elections BC](#) showing 61 per cent of ballots cast opted for the status quo, while nearly 39 per cent chose a change to proportional representation, the Angus Reid Institute's referendum exit poll finds the overwhelming support among past BC Liberal voters for their preferred choice - and more division among past BC NDP and BC Green Party voters - was a key driver of the result.

PR voters cited their perceived unfairness of the current system and the sense that their vote will matter more under a proportional one as key reasons for their choice, while FPTP voters said they were motivated by a fear that PR would mean more minority or coalition governments and a belief that theirs is the best system available.

More Key Findings:

- PR voters believed changing the system will improve voter turnout, increase the choices available to voters, and improve trust in government overall. FPTP voters largely expected turnout and voter choice to remain static under either system, and think PR would erode trust in government
- Age is also a major factor with older B.C. residents – who were more likely to vote overall, preferring FPTP by a roughly two-to-one margin. Younger voters chose PR by the same margin.
- Overall, four-in-ten British Columbians (41%) say holding this referendum was a good idea, while 36 per cent say it was a bad one. Views on this question are largely driven by how one voted, with FPTP voters saying the referendum was a bad idea and PR voters saying the opposite

At what point did you make up your mind about how you would vote in this referendum?



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from December 7 – 10, 2018, among a representative randomized sample of 646 British Columbians who voted in the referendum and who are members of [Angus Reid Forum](#). For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 3.8 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was self-commissioned and paid for by ARI. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

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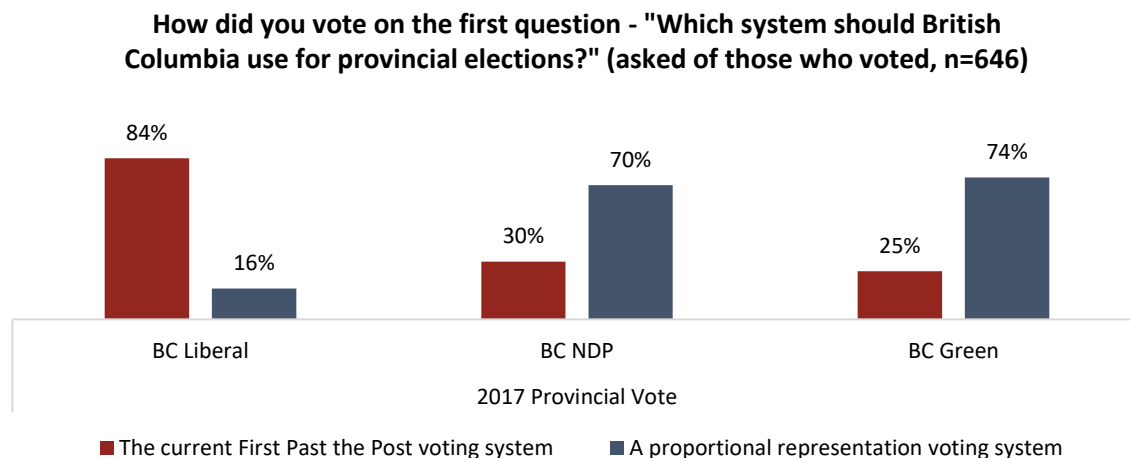
- Why people say those chose PR
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Part 3: What comes next?

- Deep visions over the necessity of the vote
- Future impact

Part 1: Politics drives the outcome

The most significant dividing line on electoral reform was political partisanship. More than seven-in-ten who voted for the governing New Democratic and Green parties in last year's election say they cast ballots for PR in this referendum. Among those who supported the BC Liberal Party in 2017, an even greater majority (84%) say they voted for FPTP:



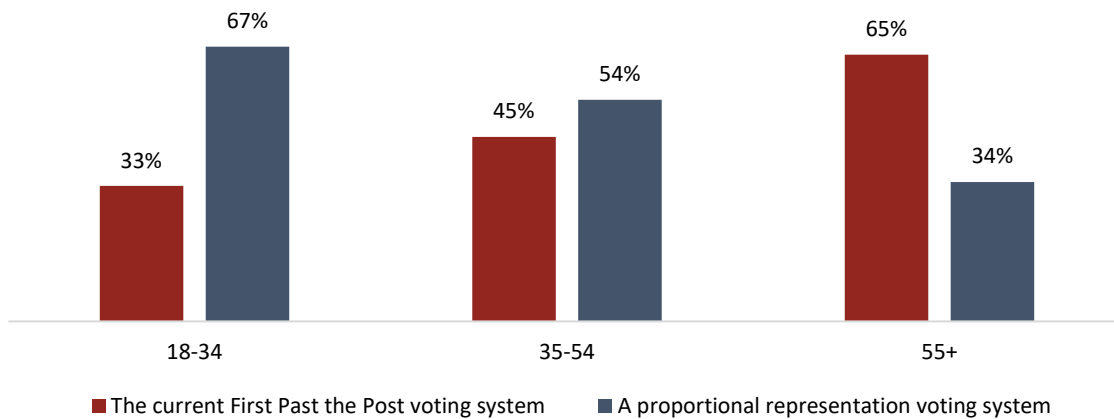
Age is also a major factor with older B.C. residents – who were more likely to vote overall, preferring FPTP by a roughly two-to-one margin. Younger voters chose PR by the same margin.

Those in the middle age group were more divided, leaning slightly toward changing the system, as seen in the following graph:

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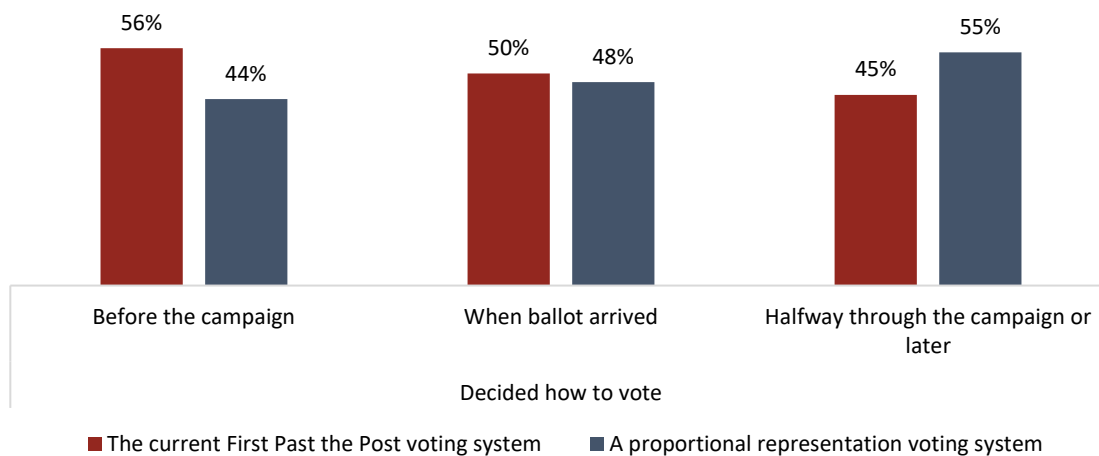
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How did you vote on the first question - "Which system should British Columbia use for provincial elections?" (asked of those who voted, n=646)



It's worth noting that the preference for proportional representation seems to have grown slightly as the campaign went on. Those voters who knew how they would vote before the campaign started were more likely to be in the FPTP camp, while those who made up their minds later in the campaign were more likely to vote for PR:

How did you vote on the first question - "Which system should British Columbia use for provincial elections?" (asked of those who voted, n=646)



Part 2: The reasons

There was no shortage of discussion during the referendum period about the pros and cons of each electoral system – many residents would have liked to have heard more of the pros and cons during the televised debate between BC NDP leader John Horgan and BC Liberal Party leader Andrew Wilkinson on November 8.

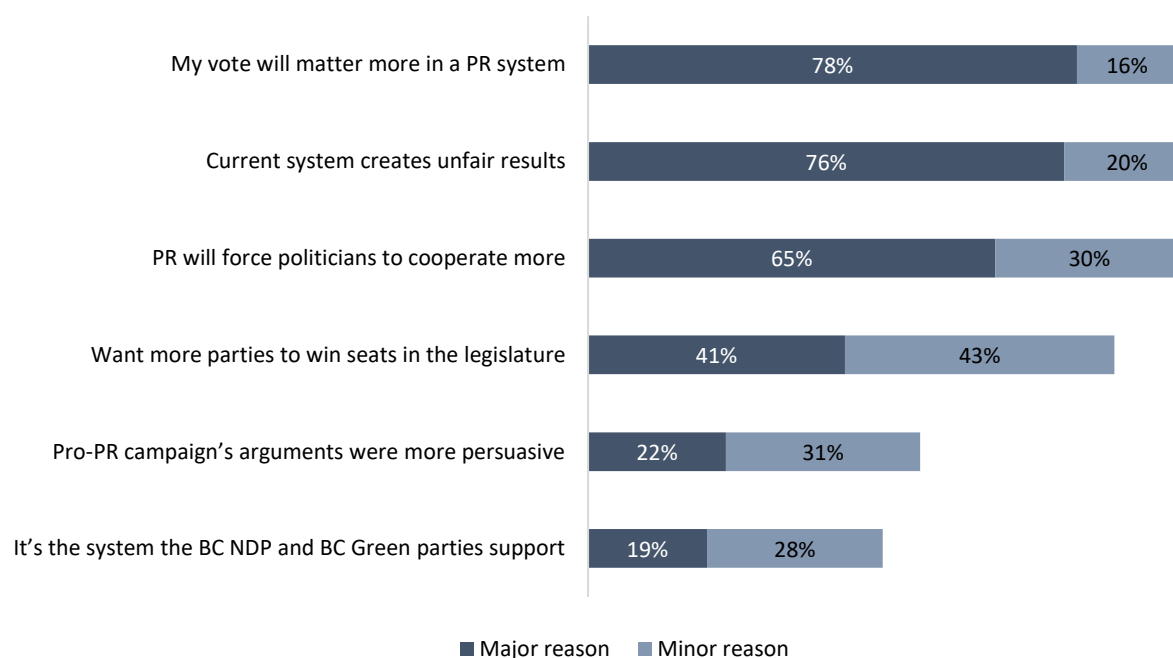
The Angus Reid Institute asked both groups of respondents, those who supported proportional representation and those who supported first past the post, about their motivations.

Why people chose PR

For those who voted to change the electoral system and introduce proportional representation, there is a sense that their future votes would carry increased importance. Nearly four-in-five (78%) say that this was a major reason for their vote, and another 16 per cent say it was a part of their decision making. Along a similar line, close to the same number (76%) say that they believe the current system creates unfair results. This is a common complaint among critics of FPTP – that it can create majority governments with lower than majority support, and that it can make third and fourth party preference irrelevant.

Notably, two-thirds of PR supporters also say that a major reason for their decision to vote this way is that it will force politicians to find common ground more often:

Percentage who say each was a reason that they support proportional representation



Just one-in-five (19%) say that they voted for this system because it was supported by the BC NDP Green parties.

Why people chose FPTP

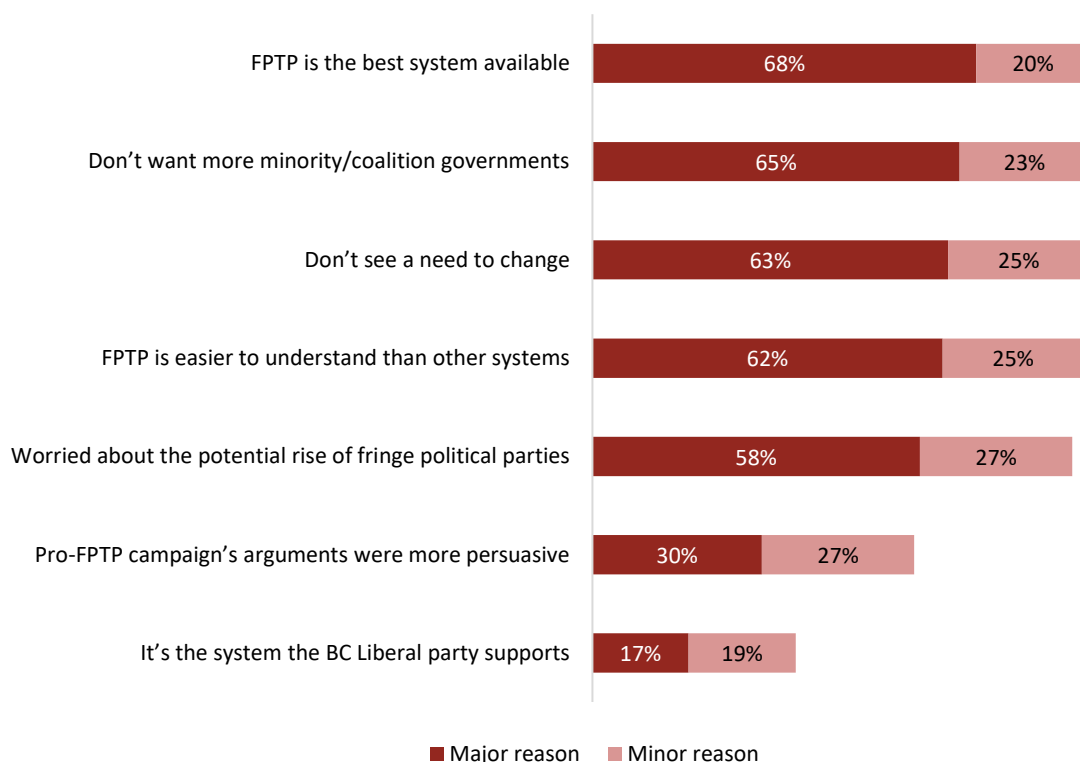
So-called false majority governments are less of a concern for those who voted for first past the post than they are for PR supporters. Indeed, two-thirds of those who voted to preserve the status quo (65%) say a major reason for their support is that they are concerned PR would result in more minority and coalition governments. This, alongside a feeling that FPTP is the best system, are the two most common motivations for FPTP voters. Two-thirds say each is a major reason that they chose to support that electoral system in the referendum.

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There is also a significant element of comfort with the current system that motivated voters on its side. Nine-in-ten FPTP voters (88%) say they saw no reason to change and 87 per cent say that the current system is much easier to understand than alternatives.

Percentage who say each was a reason that they support proportional representation



Fewer than one-in-five (17%) say that a major reason for their support is that the BC Liberal Party prefers first past the post.

Part 3: What comes next?

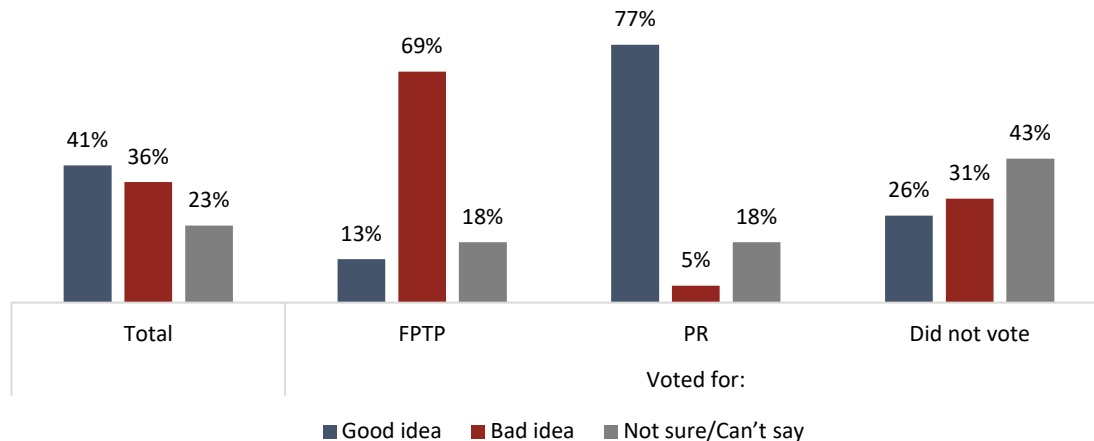
Deep divisions over the necessity of the vote

One of the largest points of disagreement between PR and FPTP supporters is whether or not the referendum was even necessary.

When first asked about the necessity of a referendum, in September of this year, residents in the province were close to unanimous in saying that this was an important step to take before making any changes to the electoral system. This sentiment has evidently changed now that the campaign has run its course.

Four-in-ten BC residents say that holding a referendum was ultimately a good idea, while an almost equal number disagree. One's opinion on the value of the referendum is largely correlated with the system they support. Seven-in-ten FPTP voters (69%) say this was a bad idea, while three-quarters of PR voters (77%) say it was a good one:

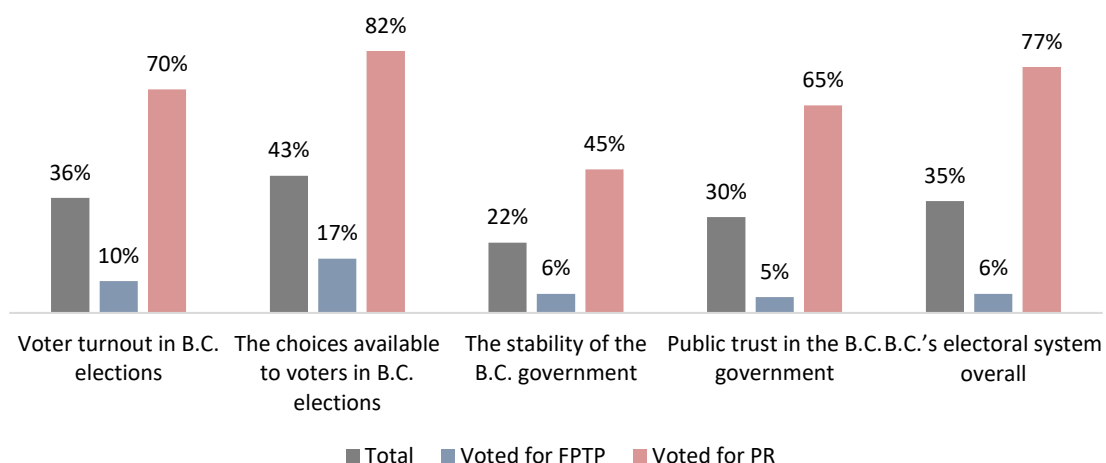
Overall, not knowing the outcome yet, do you think it was a good idea or a bad idea to have this referendum on electoral systems in the first place?



Future impact:

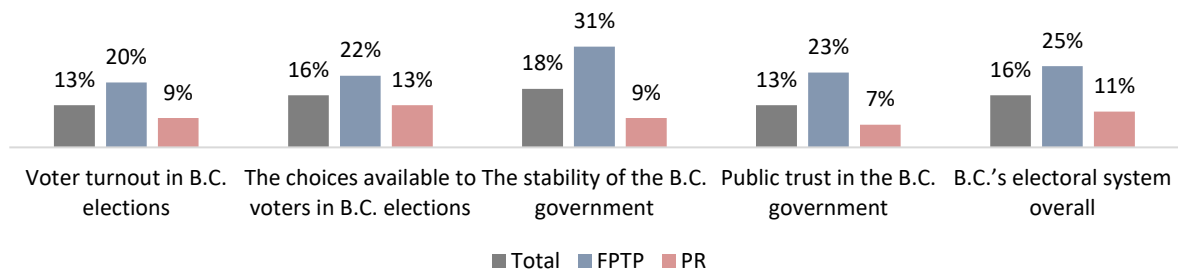
One of the major differences between supporters of each system – are views over how each system will affect – or not affect - democracy. Consider the responses from residents about the perceived impact of proportional representation in the years to come. Asked how they believe it would impact five elements of the political system in the province, at least two-thirds of PR voters say it would improve voter turnout, choice, public trust, and the electoral system more generally:

Percentage who say each would be 'better' if Proportional Representation was chosen in referendum



Asked how a win for FPTP would affect each of these elements, few FPTP supporters see improvements to democracy. They also disagree strongly with PR supporters in the potential for a change to bring positive impacts:

Percentage who say each would be 'better' if First Past the Post was chosen in referendum



*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.*

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