



Your Ideas
Your City
Our Future

Submission to Local Government Elections Task Force

April 15, 2010

Introduction

The Think City Society has been an advocate of local democratic reform since 2003 and appreciates the opportunity to make this submission to the local government elections task force.

Following the 2008 municipal elections in British Columbia, it became apparent to Think City and other democracy watchers that significant reforms to the regulation and administration of municipal elections was required.

Across the province, municipalities were plagued by numerous cases of electoral violations, unethical conduct and maladministration. Some of these cases resulted in police investigations, inquiries, and legal challenges. Public confidence in the systems used to elect local governments in British Columbia was shaken. Reforms to the electoral process at the municipal level are needed in order to restore public confidence in our democratic institutions.

To develop our organization's task force submission, Think City surveyed 3,689 British Columbians between February 22 and April 12, in cooperation with Fair Voting British Columbia. The balance of this submission will outline the key recommendations that are supported by the opinions of the thousands of British Columbians who came together to answer the fundamental question – how can we make our civic democracy stronger?

A. Election Administration

1. Role of Elections BC

Currently, local government elections are administered and managed by the staff in each municipality. These responsibilities are typically assigned to the city clerk, or chief administrative officer, or equivalent officer in addition to their other duties. As the regulation and case law governing local elections has become more complex, this task has become more complicated. Local officials often lack the time, resources and training to meet the demands of this responsibility. Local officials are also placed in the awkward position of adjudicating disputes and enforcing electoral rules with candidates who are their current or prospective employers. This unfairly places municipal staff in an uncomfortable conflict-of-interest.

Think City asked survey participants if they thought Elections BC should take over responsibility for the administration of local elections in the province. Over fifty-three per cent agreed that the province should place the administration of elections under the control of Elections BC to ensure uniformity of administration and arms' length supervision. **Based on the majority support for this measure and the public interest in ensuring that the administration of election is uniform and impartial in all municipalities, Think City supports this action.**

2. Automatic Registration of Students

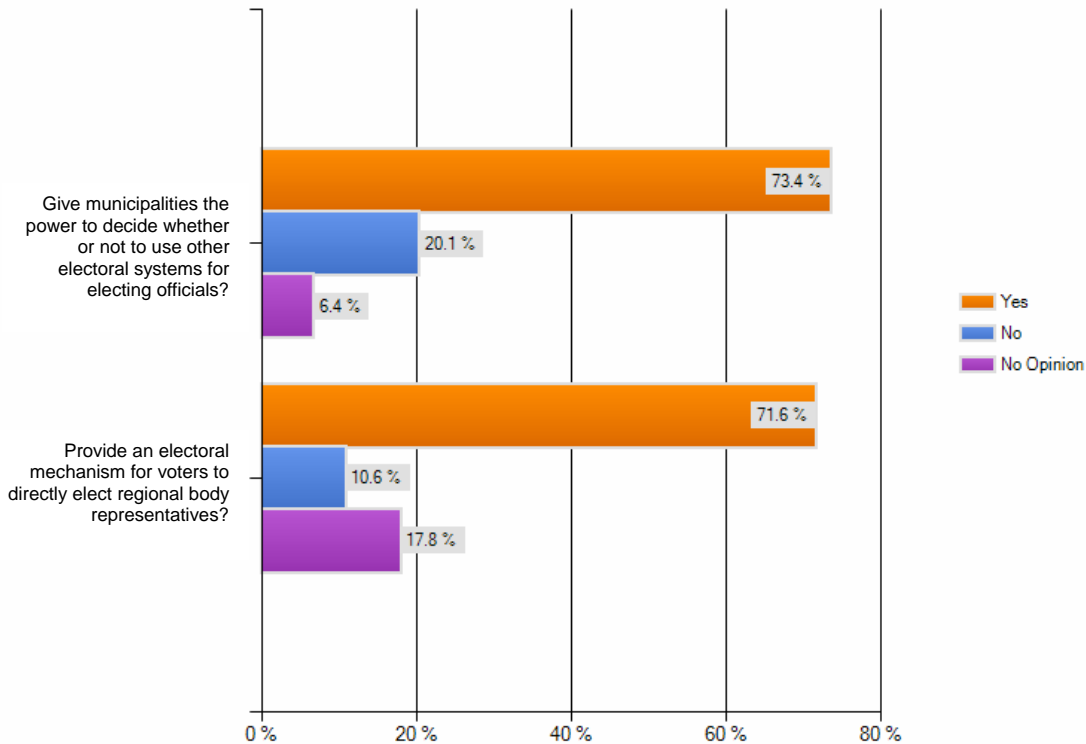
As a measure to encourage increased voter participation among young people, Think City asked if high school students should be automatically pre-registered on the voters list. Over sixty-eight per cent of survey participants agreed that high school students should be pre-registered when they turn 16 so that they would be eligible to vote in elections when they reach voting age. **Based on the strong support for this measure and the public interest in seeing increased voter participation, particularly among young people, Think City supports this action.**

3. Term of Office

There has been some debate about whether or not the term of office for mayors and councilors should be extended. The primary benefit of doing so would be reduced costs due to holding elections less frequently. The negative consequences would include reduced accountability of representatives to their electors. Think City asked how long the term of office should be. Fourteen per cent of survey participants said it should be

reduced to two years, almost sixty-three per cent said it should remain at three years, and almost twenty-four per cent said it should be increased to four years. **Based on the strong public consensus in favour of the three-year term, Think City supports keeping the term of elected office at three years.**

Table 1 - Electoral System Choice: When it comes to choosing our elected officials, do you think the Province of British Columbia should:



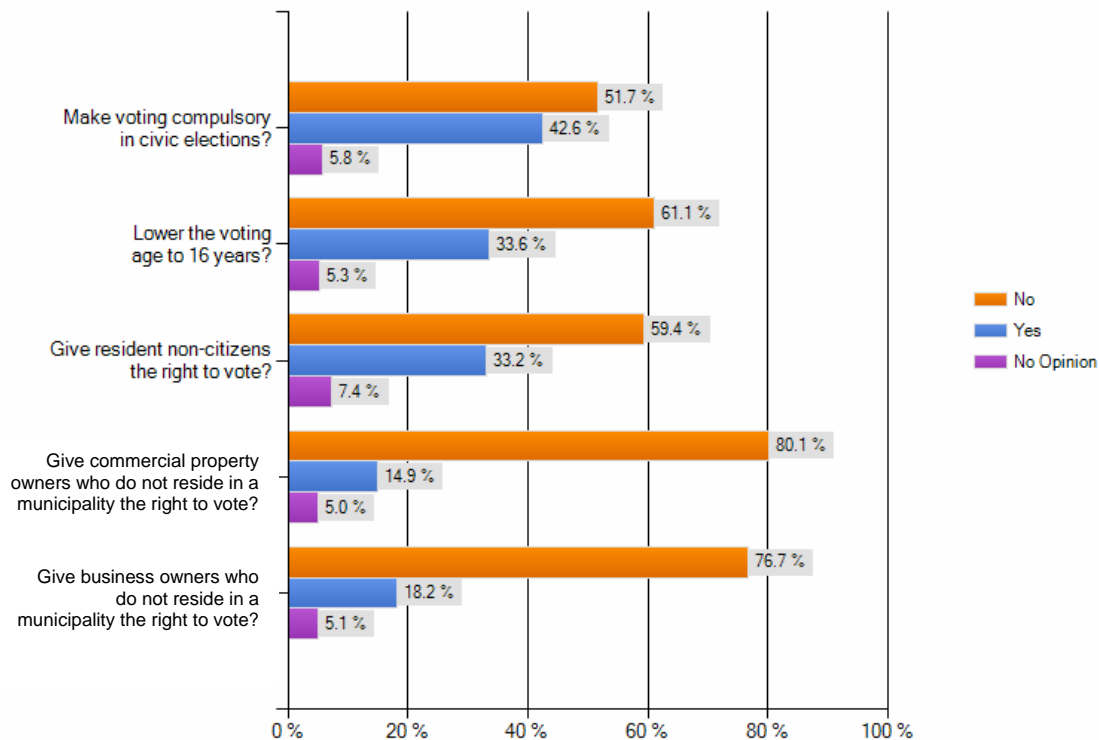
4. Electoral Choice

There was significant support for allowing municipalities the authority to adopt electoral systems that are most suited to local needs and preferences. These may include forms of constituency representation (wards), proportional representation, ranked ballots, and various mixed models. Over seventy-three per cent of survey participants said they agreed that municipalities should have the power to decide whether or not to use other electoral systems. **Based on the strong support for this measure and the unanimous all-party support of Vancouver City Council, Think City supports this action.**

5. Direct Election of Regional Boards

Citizens also said they wanted to be able to directly elect representatives to regional bodies such as Metro Vancouver, TransLink, and other regional boards. Over seventy-one per cent said they agreed the province should provide a mechanism for voters to directly elect regional body representatives. **Based on the strong support for direct election of representatives to regional bodies, and the growing importance and budget authority of such bodies, Think City supports this action.**

Table 2 - Extending the Franchise: When it comes to who votes, do you think the Province of British Columbia should:



6. Extending the Franchise

Think City asked citizens whether or not they believed the franchise (the right to vote) should be extended to various groups as a means of increasing voter participation and ensuring that more voices in the city are heard. First, we asked if voting in municipal elections should be compulsory. A narrow majority of fifty-one per cent disagreed with this proposal.

Secondly, we asked if the voting age should be lowered from 18 to 16. Slightly over sixty-one per cent disagreed with this proposal. Thirdly, we asked if resident non-citizens should be allowed to vote. Over fifty-nine per cent of survey participants disagreed. Fourthly, we asked if commercial property owners residing outside the municipality should be allowed to vote. Over eighty per cent of participants opposed this idea. Finally, we asked if business owners residing outside the municipality should be allowed to vote. Over seventy-six per cent of our survey participants disagreed with this proposal.

As there was not majority support for any of the proposals on extending the franchise, **Think City does not support changes in this area.** There has been some public debate around whether or not businesses should have voting rights in municipal elections. We believe that the results of the survey are conclusive on this question. The majority of British Columbians appear to be opposed to the idea of extending the franchise to business interests.

B. Election Financing

Think City has long supported tighter regulation of election finance at the local level. At present, the electoral system is largely unregulated and large sums of money are spent in many municipalities each electoral cycle. Each cycle, candidates and parties spend record amounts on campaigning. In Vancouver during the last municipal election the four parties combined to set a new campaign spending record of \$6 million. On a per capita basis municipal candidates in Vancouver spend more than anywhere else in Canada, and more than what candidates in federal or provincial elections are allowed to spend.

Think City believes municipal campaign spending is out of control, and has a corrosive effect on our democratic institutions. This level of spending requires municipal parties to raise equivalently large sums and helps to create the impression that large campaign contributors have disproportionate influence on policy decisions at city hall. Citizens deserve an electoral system that is open, transparent, and not disproportionately financed by powerful special interests.

In recent years, Think City has proposed several ideas to regulate what has become the lawless “wild west” political campaigning. We believe it is in the public interest to clean up election financing at the municipal level in British Columbia. In this survey on civic electoral reform we asked the public about measures on campaign spending limits, contribution limits, disclosure of donations, and tax credit status for political donations.

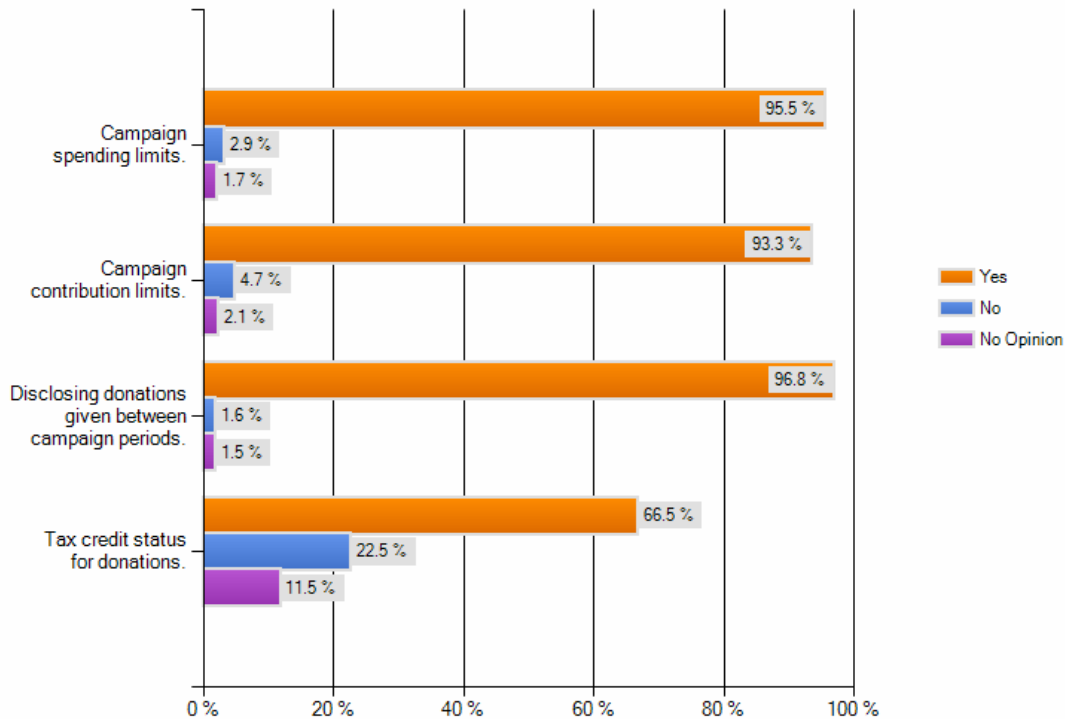
1. Spending Limits

Over ninety-five per cent of survey participants agreed that political parties at the municipal level should be subject to campaign spending limits. This would bring municipal campaign spending under some form of regulation, similar to what exists at the federal and provincial levels. Campaign spending limits help to create a level playing field and ensure that large financial contributors are not able to buy an election. **Think City supports policy changes to limit campaign spending in municipal elections.**

2. Contribution Limits

Over ninety-four per cent of survey participants agreed that political parties at the municipal level should be subject to campaign contribution limits. Contribution limits regulate the amount that a political party can accept from any single contributor. This helps to ensure that no one contributor has disproportionate influence. **Think City supports policy changes to limit campaign contributions in municipal elections.**

Table 3 - Campaign Finances: Currently federal and/or provincial political parties are subject to a number of financing regulations. Do you think local political parties contesting elections should be subject to:



3. Disclosure of Donations

Over ninety-six per cent of survey participants agreed that political parties at the municipal level should be subject to disclosure requirements for donations given between election campaign periods. Knowing who is donating money to the political parties and candidates is important information for voters and media because it helps to ensure transparency in decision-making. The ability of voters to make an informed choice is contingent on the availability of information about the sources of financial support enjoyed by the different parties and candidates.

Campaign finance disclosure should be made public as soon as practicable during the campaign, not after the election as is the current practice. Voters deserve to know who is contributing to the political process before they cast their votes. In many jurisdictions in the United States, campaign donations are disclosed throughout the campaign period on a regular basis. **Think City supports tighter rules for the pre-election disclosure of political donations** and believes this practice would greatly improve the transparency of municipal elections, and make British Columbia a national leader in campaign finance disclosure.

4. Tax Credit Status for Donations

Over sixty-six per cent of survey participants agreed that donations to political parties at the municipal level should be eligible for tax credit status. Almost two-thirds of participants supported making donations eligible for tax credits, similar to what exists for donations at the federal and provincial levels. Tax credits encourage people to support the political process by donating to candidates they believe in. They also help to enforce compliance with campaign finance rules by creating an auditable paper trail for each political donation. **Think City supports policy changes aimed at making donations to municipal parties and candidates eligible for tax credit status.**

5. Union and Corporate Donations

Think City asked our survey participants if they supported a ban on donations that don't come from individuals. Large organizations such as corporations and unions often have a lot at stake in the outcome of elections. There is a perception that such organizations use their financial resources to gain disproportionate access and influence at all levels of government. Legislation exists at the federal level that bans unions, corporations and other organizations from making political contributions.

Over sixty-two per cent of our survey participants agreed that donations that do not come from individuals (e.g. corporations, non-profits, unions) should be banned. **Think City believes that taking big money out of local politics is good public policy and we support policy changes that would ban all political contributions that do not come from individuals.**

6. Public Funding

Another public policy option that could reduce the dependence of political parties on large financial contributors is public financing. A model of public financing exists at the federal level. This model gives parties funding based on the number of votes they received in the last federal election. Think City asked what British Columbians thought about introducing a similar system of public funding for municipal political parties. Over fifty-eight per cent of survey participants said they supported public funding of local parties that is based on their share of votes cast. **Think City supports public policy changes aimed at providing a system of public funding for municipal political parties in British Columbia.**

C. City of Vancouver

Think City has long been an advocate for civic electoral reform in the City of Vancouver. Since 2003, we have lobbied for campaign spending limits, disclosure requirements, electoral system choice, and other measures aimed at making our municipal government more open, transparent and democratic.

It is important to note that Vancouver is not governed by the Local Government Act, rather it has its own legislation, the Vancouver Charter. This means the provincial government can choose to allow Vancouver the right to amend its legislation without changing the rules for the rest of the municipalities in the province. There is ample precedent for this as the provincial government amends the Vancouver Charter on a reasonably regular basis, usually at the request of the City of Vancouver.

All three parties represented on Vancouver city council are in agreement on the need for campaign finance reform. The last municipal election saw the parties set a new record for campaign spending with the combined spending of all four parties in excess of \$6 million. All parties are in agreement that campaign spending limits are needed. This all-party consensus is not a new development, rather it dates back as far as 2005. Subsequent votes at city council in November 2007 and, most recently, in March 2010, have reaffirmed the all-party support for this necessary reform.

If the provincial government is unwilling to adopt campaign spending limits province-wide, it should at least respect the all-party consensus that exists in Vancouver on this issue. **Think City believes that the provincial government should, at a minimum, make the necessary changes to the Vancouver Charter to allow the City of Vancouver to move forward with campaign spending limits.**

In addition to all-party support for campaign finance reform, in March 2010 the three parties represented on Vancouver city council reaffirmed and strengthened the unanimous 2005 council vote that asked that Vancouver be given the authority to adopt other electoral systems that are best suited to local needs and preferences. As outlined previously, there was strong support for this measure in our survey, therefore, **if the provincial government is unwilling to adopt this measure province-wide, it should at least amend the Vancouver Charter to give Vancouver the right to select the electoral system of its choice.**

D. Demographic Profile

Almost 3,700 British Columbians participated in Think City's 2010 Civic Electoral Reform Survey. In all, 50 per cent of survey participants are men and 46 per cent are women, while four per cent declined to answer. In terms of age, those aged 18 to 30 comprised fourteen per cent, those aged 31 to 44 comprised twenty per cent, those aged 45 to 64 comprised forty-seven per cent, and those over 65 comprised nineteen per cent.

Our survey respondents are generally highly educated and have above average incomes. Ninety per cent have completed at least two years of post-secondary education or technical training, and almost sixty-nine percent have an undergraduate or post graduate university degree. Almost sixty-three per cent of participants have annual incomes over \$50,000. Think City survey participants are well informed about civic affairs and are very likely to vote in municipal elections. A remarkable eighty-seven per cent of participants voted in the last municipal election in 2008.

E. About Think City

Launched in 2002, Think City believes citizens can make the best decision about the kind of city they want, when they are given the time, support and tools they need.

Think City works to:

- a) help citizens realize the issues facing their communities and develop collective solutions;
- b) facilitate the strengthening of civil societies within communities and across British Columbia;
- c) educate citizens on ways to protect their environment, strengthen local economies, and ensure the protection of individual rights and access to basic services; and
- d) provide communities with educational tools to assist in the long-term development of healthier societies.

As a result of our work, Think City has developed expertise in producing large-scale citizen participation exercises through public forums, workshops, surveys and hallmark conferences. More recently, Think City has expanded on its role as a civic issues convenor to begin developing policy solutions through our Dream Vancouver process that was launched in October 2007.

Our partners include academic institutions, trade unions, small businesses and other non-profit organizations who share our values. Our non-partisan, non-profit organization is run by a volunteer board that is elected each year.

F. Contact Information

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