



## **Submission to the BC Special Committee on Democratic and Electoral Reform From the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association (BCCLA)**

**July 25, 2025**

### **Introduction**

The British Columbia Civil Liberties Association (BCCLA) is grateful for the opportunity to present this submission to the Special Committee on Democratic and Electoral Reform. As Canada's oldest and most active civil liberties organization, we have long advocated for the protection and expansion of democratic rights. Our participation in this process stems from our deep commitment to advancing an inclusive, equitable, and robust democratic system in British Columbia.

This submission outlines the BCCLA's position that governments in British Columbia and Canada more broadly have a constitutional and democratic obligation to address electoral reform directly, rather than relegating these responsibilities to public referenda. We also make two key policy recommendations to strengthen democratic inclusion: extending voting rights to permanent residents and lowering the voting age to 16. These reforms would advance the values of equity, participation, and accountability that underpin a healthy and sustainable democracy.

At a time when many individuals in British Columbia, especially those who are marginalized or disenfranchised, feel disconnected from the political process, these reforms represent a chance for the province to redefine itself as a leader in democratic progress. The BCCLA believes that without such fundamental changes, our democracy risks perpetuating exclusionary practices that alienate vast segments of our population. This submission builds upon the voices of key advocacy groups such as Fair Vote BC, Springtide, and the #LostVotes campaign, which have raised concerns about the accessibility of electoral participation for all residents in British Columbia.

### **1. Government Responsibility to Enact Electoral Reform Without Referenda**

Electoral reform is fundamentally a matter of democratic justice. It determines how power is distributed and how meaningfully the people are represented. We recognize the public's desire to have a voice in decisions about electoral systems. However, we urge the Committee to recognize that placing the burden of reform solely on referenda is neither a constitutional necessity nor a principled democratic practice.

Constitutional and statutory authority to reform electoral laws lies with legislatures. Elected representatives have both the responsibility and the legitimacy to undertake complex policy reforms, particularly where the rights and representation of marginalized groups are at stake. While referenda may seem to democratize the process, they often oversimplify complex policy questions, entrench the status quo, and risk marginalizing voices with less access to public platforms.

As Fair Vote BC and Springtide have aptly noted in their submissions, referenda on electoral reform have historically failed not due to public rejection of democratic fairness, but because of insufficient public education, confusing ballot design, and politically motivated fearmongering. The BCCLA joins these organizations in calling for legislative leadership, rather than referenda, as the proper way forward for democratic renewal.

## **2. Expanding the Right to Vote to Permanent Residents**

The BCCLA supports the extension of voting rights to permanent residents in British Columbia's provincial elections. This position is grounded in our commitment to human rights and democratic participation. Permanent residents live, work, pay taxes, send their children to school, and contribute to the social and cultural fabrics of their communities. Yet, they are excluded from the most fundamental expression of democracy: the vote.

As of 2024, the estimated population of permanent residents in British Columbia is 5,719,594.<sup>1</sup> In Vancouver alone, estimates suggest that permanent residents represent a population equivalent to one-third of the total voter turnout in recent municipal elections.<sup>2</sup> Their exclusion constitutes a significant democratic deficit.

The BCCLA has long advocated for this reform in partnership with the #LostVotes campaign. In 2019, we co-authored a letter to the then Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing urging legislative changes to allow permanent residents to vote in local elections. We argued that enfranchising permanent residents would make local governments more inclusive, representative, and accountable.

Permanent residents are governed by BC's laws, contribute economically and socially to its communities, and deserve a voice in shaping the province's future. More than 45 countries and multiple jurisdictions in the U.S. already permit non-citizen residents to vote in local elections.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Quarterly population highlights. (n.d.). [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/data/statistics/people-population-community/population/quarterly\\_population\\_highlights.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/data/statistics/people-population-community/population/quarterly_population_highlights.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Bugar, J., & Monkman, M. (2010, March). *Exploring the demographics of voters in British Columbia*. Who Heads to the Polls? Exploring the Demographics of Voters in British Columbia. <https://elections.bc.ca/docs/stats/Who-heads-to-the-polls.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Explainer: Noncitizen voting in U.S. elections | migrationpolicy.org. (n.d.-a). <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/content/noncitizen-voting-us-elections>

Extending voting rights to permanent residents reflects a growing international norm of democratic inclusion and fairness.

Arguments against such reforms, including concerns about foreign influence or insufficient integration, are both speculative and discriminatory. As Professor Kees Groenendijk has noted in his survey of non-citizen voting rights in Europe, such concerns echo outdated rationales once used to exclude women, workers and youth from the voting franchise.<sup>4</sup> Today, these same arguments should not prevent extending rights to permanent residents.

### **3. Lowering the Voting Age to 16**

The BCCLA supports lowering the provincial voting age to 16, in alignment with the Vote16 campaign and other youth-driven democratic reform initiatives. This position aligns with our core values of inclusion, dignity, and full participation.

Young people aged 16 and 17 already contribute meaningfully to society. They work, pay taxes, volunteer, and in many cases care for family members. They also attend school, where civic education can be directly linked to real-world democratic participation. As research from Austria, Germany, and Scotland demonstrates, enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds leads to higher levels of civic engagement and long-term voter turnout.<sup>5</sup>

Neuroscientific studies have shown that the kind of decision-making required in voting ("cold cognition") matures by age 16. Further, youth tend to vote at higher rates when still embedded in their home communities, supported by schools and families. Enfranchising young people also contributes to the political education of their families, promoting a virtuous cycle of democratic engagement.

Critics often argue that young people lack the maturity or knowledge to vote responsibly, but similar arguments were once used to oppose the enfranchisement of women and Indigenous peoples. These claims are not supported by evidence. Research from Elections Canada and other scholars confirms that 16- and 17-year-olds are just as politically informed and engaged as older voters.

Support for Vote16 continues to grow across British Columbia. Municipal councils, school boards, unions, and community organizations have passed resolutions in favour of the reform. The Union of BC Municipalities has endorsed a lower voting age in local elections. It is time for

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<sup>4</sup> Local voting rights for Non-Nationals in Europe: What we know and what we need to learn. (n.d.-b). <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/local-voting-rights-non-nationals-europe-what-we-know-and-what-we-need-learn>

<sup>5</sup> Eichhorn, J., & Huebner, C. (2025, January 22). *Longer-term effects of voting at age 16: Higher turnout among young people in Scotland*. White Rose Research Online. <https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/222196/>

the provincial government to act decisively and recognize the democratic agency of young people.

## **Conclusion**

The BCCLA respectfully urges the Special Committee on Democratic and Electoral Reform to recommend the following:

1. That the government of British Columbia fulfill its democratic responsibility to undertake electoral reform through legislative processes, not referenda;
2. That permanent residents be granted the right to vote in provincial elections; and
3. That the voting age for provincial elections be lowered to 16.

We strongly believe that these changes will make British Columbia's democracy more inclusive, just, and representative. They are not only principled but practical, supported by international best practices and growing public support. We thank the Committee for its important work and welcome the opportunity to engage further on these critical issues.