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\$18m set aside for promotion of polls

THE Government will mount a major \$18 million publicity campaign to secure high voter turnouts for the three-tier elections in 1991.

Of this amount \$9.8 million has been earmarked for promoting Hongkong's maiden direct elections for 18 of the 60 Legislative Council seats to be contested on September 15.

The Chief Secretary, Sir David Ford, described the total amount as a significant increase over the \$2.6 million spent on election publicity in 1988-89.

"It will have all the normal attributes of a government publicity campaign using all the media and some other innovative ideas," he said, adding that polling days for the three sets of direct elections would be held on Sundays to facilitate higher turnout.

But Sir David noted that voting rates would hinge on factors such as the weather, competitiveness of the elections, the appeal of the candidates to the electorate and their efforts in canvassing support.

The Chief Secretary, however, ruled out a call by

Councillor Mr James Tien Pei-chun for compulsory voting.

"With a few exceptions, most democracies in the world do not compel people to turn out to vote by law. In Hongkong we recognise that it is the right of our people to vote at elections," Sir David said.

"In a free society such as ours we firmly believe it should be left to the conscious choice of the individual to exercise this right. The Government will not therefore introduce compulsory voting for the 1991 elections."

A government study has shown that only three countries practise compulsory voting, including Australia and Belgium.

In their last election 5.8 per cent of the 9.9 million Australian voters did not cast their ballots. Of the votes cast 8.7 million were valid.

In Belgium, 7.2 per cent of the seven million electors did not vote. Six million ballots were valid, while the remaining 512,000 were invalid.

Sir David conceded that,

given the short time available, the Government had not conducted any detailed survey of foreign electoral systems.

But he dismissed as technically difficult the possibility of instituting automatic voter registration in Hongkong as the Government did not keep adequate up-to-date data on residents.

The estimated number of eligible voters is 3.6 million. Of the 430,000 applications for registration received by October 1 many were duplicates or notification of change of address.

The provisional register of electors to be published tomorrow will cover 241,513 new voters in addition to the existing 1,597,567. After deleting cases of death, emigration and loss of contact, there remain about 1.8 million electors.

"By projection, we expect to add another 50,000 new voters on to the final register, this will bring the total number to 1.85 million. That is a net increase of 252,000 over the number on the existing register," Sir David said.