

THE BRITISH COLUMBIA CITIZENS ASSEMBLY ON ELECTORAL REFORM

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Who cares?

- The BCCA proposed a major constitutional change – from a single-member plurality system (SMP) to a single-transferable vote system (STV)
 - basically a form of Proportional Representation
 - would probably have ended single-party governments
 - would certainly have increased the average district “magnitude” and changed the link between citizens and representatives
- Received 58% of the votes cast at a referendum on the BCCA-worded ballot measure – threshold was 60%

Origins

- Plurality reversal 1996 → public commitment by Gordon Campbell, implemented after victory 2001
- Decade of electoral failure:
 - centrist signal 1991, subverted by non-centrist capture of both major parties, 1991-6
 - plurality reversal, 1996
 - struggles over recall, 1996-2001 – all attempts failed
 - overwhelming majority, 2001 – 77 of 79 seats
- *Normalization after 2005*

Assembly – Representation

- Selection
 - quasi-random:
 - *gender* and *geographic* stratification: initial draw of 100 males + 100 males in each district = 15800, but **23034** letters ultimately mailed
 - yield of **1715** interested citizens = 7.4%
 - *age*-stratified draw of **1441** invited to information sessions
 - **964** still willing to be drawn = 4.0% of initial; 67% of invited
 - one female + one male drawn per district, names drawn from hat (*sic*)
 - Two additional self-identified Aboriginal persons from pool of unselected
 - Bias:
 - away from “visible minorities”
 - toward middle age
 - toward highly educated
 - toward North and rural places

Assembly - Deliberation

- Learning Phase (Winter-Spring)
 - 6 weekends, Jan 11-Mar 26
 - 50 public hearings, May-June
 - Summer meeting (significantly, in North)
- Deliberation phase (Fall):
 - 6 weekends
 1. values: *fairness, local representation, maximal choice*
 2. discussion of further deliberation; focus on *two* alternatives -- STV or MMP; discussion of STV
 3. discussion of MMP
 4. votes: MMP vs STV; STV vs SMP; whether or not to propose ballot question
 5. confirm details of STV and ballot question
 6. confirm report

Referendum

- held in conjunction with General Election, 17 May 2005
- threshold for passage = 60% province-wide & simple majority in 60% of districts
- almost no advertising
- received 58% and won in 77 of 79 districts
- CA appears to have been critical:
 - STV itself not widely understood
 - “populists” saw CA as representative and deliberative
 - “anti-populists” saw CA as expert
- ***Contrast: Ontario 2007 & BC 2009***

Citizens' Assembly as Agent

- Self-selection
 - Can the draw be truly random?
 - critical to credibility where final choice lies with electorate
 - to the extent it is, implications for educational requirement → number of meetings
 - Implications of self-selection:
 - may produce a more knowledgeable group
 - helps if self-selection independent of stake in outcome
 - even so, may produce bias toward change
- Representativeness
 - credibility again
 - does it guarantee critical mass to key minorities?
- Size
 - critical to representativeness, both descriptively and for critical mass of minorities
 - limits deliberation
- Can deliberativeness be guaranteed?
- Role beyond proposing referendum question?
- Cost = f (size, number of meetings)