

**Citizens' Choice to Reform SMP:
the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform**

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Carty, Blais & Fournier

Canada has long embraced majoritarian electoral politics and remains one of the few major established democracies to cling to a single-member plurality (SMP) electoral system. Despite proposals for change from a few enthusiasts and some political scientists, the call for electoral reform has had very little traction and the issue has rarely appeared on the country's public agenda. It is perhaps all the more surprising then, that in the space of two years, half of the provinces should suddenly be engaged in serious reform exercises. Matthew Shugart has sought to explain this by answering the questions "When and Why are reforms away from majoritarianism considered?" But even if these questions are answered we are still left with Who, How and What questions. Who gets to identify the reform proposal, how do they do it, and what do they recommend as an alternative to the existing majoritarian system. Answers to those questions are likely to be critical to any successful electoral reform.

To date there have been specific proposals drafted to reform the single-member plurality systems in Quebec, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and British Columbia (Carty 2006). All but British Columbia's recommend (quite different) forms of a mixed-member proportional (MMP) system. That is not surprising for, as Shugart indicates, that is perhaps the least radical direction which reform might take, and the examples of New Zealand and the new assemblies of Britain's Celtic peripheries are often held up as working examples of this alternative. British Columbia is the unusual case – its reform exercise led to a recommendation for the adoption of the single transferable vote (STV), a proposal that was supported by 58% of the electorate in a province-wide referendum at the time of the 2005 general election. In this paper we explore the who, how and what aspects of British Columbia's electoral reform process. It isn't over, and so we conclude with a word about next steps.

Electoral Reform in British Columbia

Shugart's analysis of the situations in which plurality (also known as first-past-the-post, FPTP) electoral systems are reformed suggests that movement to reform the electoral system in British Columbia was almost inevitable. The province's politics were marked by the two most dramatic instances of inherent systemic failure – a 'wrong winner' (which Shugart less contentiously calls a 'spurious majority') and a 'super-lopsided' majority – in quick succession. This cycle ended with a political party, previously disadvantaged by the system being swept into office on a platform of change. Thus, with both inherent and contingent factors in place, electoral reform quickly moved onto the active agenda. In this case it was advanced by a Liberal party government which had promised to take up the issue after losing the 1996 election to the New Democrats despite outpolling them by 42 to 39%. The Liberals' subsequent overwhelming victory in 2001, when the party won all but two of the legislature's seventy-nine seats, may have only confirmed their view that the electoral system was unable to meet the minimum requirements of an effective Westminster-style parliamentary government.

During the legislative debate on the proposal to establish a *Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform* neither the Premier nor the leader of the opposition made reference to those two elections although both were aware that widespread frustration at those results lay behind the interest in electoral reform

in their parties and among the wider public. The Premier reminded the House that that his party's election manifesto had explicitly promised to give the people "the right to demonstrate how they want to elect their MLAs."¹ Much of the discussion focused on a perceived general democratic malaise and declining levels of public trust in political institutions, particularly the first-past-the-post electoral system. Premier Campbell spoke about the need to "re-establish the critical link between our democratic institutions and those they are supposed to serve" while Opposition leader MacPhail specifically pointed to an Institute for Research on Public Policy study by Howe and Northrup that documented British Columbians' increasing dissatisfaction with the electoral system.² Both major parties then voted to support the creation of the electoral reform assembly.

While serious consideration of electoral system change was taken up after the 2001 election, it is important to note that it was part of the new government's wider democratic and institutional reform agenda. The Liberals saw it as part of a package of changes which included reforming governmental accounting practices to make them more transparent, establishing fixed election dates (a first for Canadian legislatures) and the opening of cabinet meetings to public scrutiny by broadcasting some of them on the parliamentary television channel. In this it saw itself as leading a broader democratic reform movement in response to public opinion calling for change. This reading of the context of the times proved prescient for two provinces have subsequently followed their lead by fixing election dates (and a Bill to do so nationally is currently before Parliament) and electoral reform moved onto the active agenda of several jurisdictions.

Whatever the status of first-past-the-post electoral politics in other political systems, it was hardly revered in British Columbia where electoral reform had occasionally been advocated as a tool for depriving the socialists of an opportunity to form a majority government. During the early 1950s the province had conducted two successive general elections using a majority rule preferential ballot system in districts whose magnitude ranged from one to three. Multi-member electoral districts persisted even after the province reverted to a plurality rule in 1956. Some three-member districts were used until the mid-1960s, and two-member districts were used until 1987 when half of the legislature's members were elected in them. In fact, the election of 1991 was the first in the province's history in which all MLAs were elected by a plurality rule in single-member districts: it was also the year in which recall was adopted in a referendum that had the support of over 80% of the electorate.

Thus, it seems clear that if the inherent and contingent factors necessary to stimulate electoral reform were in place in British Columbia it is also evident that the context guaranteed a considerable openness to the project, both in terms of specifics such as district magnitudes but also the broader representational principles that might be invoked. What was less obvious was how a reform agenda might be advanced. The really revolutionary aspect of the British Columbia process was the politicians' decision to exclude themselves and hand the problem over to ordinary citizens. Premier Campbell rightly noted that the plan called for "an act of true citizenship"³ on the part of those who would make up a citizens' assembly. That had never been done before in any democracy and so the outcome was quite unpredictable.

A Citizens' Assembly

The idea to use a citizens' assembly to deal with the issue of electoral reform seems to have evolved in discussions around a perceived democratic deficit and no one individual can legitimately claim parentage. Certainly the growing interest in and experimentation with citizen juries, deliberative polls, and other forms of democratic civic engagement in other political systems was well known to

reform advocates. At the same time, the enormously frustrating failures of the early 1990s to resolve outstanding Canadian constitutional issues led a number of political activists to consider whether new processes to advance a reform agenda needed to be developed. The Canada West Foundation led in the development of this work studying and advocating the use of constituent assemblies as a vehicle for change. Electoral reform enthusiasts in British Columbia – led by a former MLA and Social Credit party government caucus chair, Nick Loenen – began a campaign to convince politicians that an assembly of ordinary citizens might be the best mechanism to deal with the issue and recommended that it be coupled with a popular referendum as in New Zealand.⁴

The prospect of electoral reform took a major step forward when Liberal leader Gordon Campbell, speaking to a party policy convention in April 1999, indicated that he favoured creating a citizens' assembly to look at the issue.⁵ His party was then in opposition, and no doubt unhappy about having won a plurality of votes but lost the precious (1996) election. The Liberals made Campbell's reform proposal part of their election manifesto and after winning a 'super-lopsided' victory in 2001 the new Premier moved to create an assembly process. Campbell's argument for turning the issue over to the public was simple. He argued that "the rules of democracy should be designed by the people they serve, not by the power brokers who may wish that the democracy worked in their interests (2003: 4)." By power brokers he meant politicians who were engaged in the electoral game and so were in a conflict of interest over the rules governing their activities.

Once safely in office the Liberals had to decide what to do about the issue. The new caucus members had learned in their pre-election party candidate school that the Premier fully intended to implement the promises made in the election manifesto document.⁶ It was clear that Campbell was personally committed to the assembly idea and it was his leadership that put and kept it on the agenda. Without his direct efforts there would have been no assembly. Thus, when the issue came to caucus for initial discussions members recognized that the issue of an assembly was settled and the question they wrestled with was how they might proceed.

Promising to hold a citizens' assembly was one thing, creating one was another for, as Campbell (2003: 4) said on introducing it to the legislature, "no government in the history of British Columbia, in the history of our country" had ever done it before. He could have added no government anywhere had ever done it before. The basic idea was to involve the province's public as fully as possible in discussions about what sort of electoral system it wanted. To do so there were to be three public dimensions to the reform process. First there would be the meetings of the Assembly itself. Having debated the issue the Assembly would then engage the population in a set of community hearings to provide for the greatest possible public input. The final, third dimension to public involvement would be a referendum on any recommendation the Assembly made. Each stage was to be as transparent as possible and independent of any government direction or control. Caucus members came to embrace this concept as a way of integrating the province's populism in a policy-making process. The thought that they could present this to the public as genuinely non-partisan appealed to a caucus most of whose policies were being fiercely resisted by partisan opponents.

With no blueprint outlining how a citizens' assembly might actually be constructed,⁷ the government commissioned Gordon Gibson, a one-time MLA turned public affairs commentator and a Senior Fellow of the Fraser Institute, a Vancouver-based think tank, to develop a model. Gibson produced a detailed plan and budget that was accepted in large part by the government: the major modification it made to his proposal was to increase the Assembly size in order to increase the prospects that it would be fully representative of the provincial electorate.⁸ The key features of the final Assembly plan were:

- *Random selection of members*

All British Columbians on the voters list (with the explicit exception of active politicians) were to be eligible for random selection for membership. Participation would not be compulsory so that an element of self-selection was inevitably involved.

This feature was important to establish the legitimacy of the Assembly, both amongst the members and with the wider public. Though members were selected from individual electoral districts to ensure geographic coverage from the entire province they were to come as representative individual British Columbians, not as the local representatives of any community or group.

- *Gender balance*

There was a deliberate decision taken to provide for equal numbers of men and women.

This feature marked the Assembly out as unique for no legislature elected (or appointed) in Canada had ever come close to being gender-balanced. For members this feature strengthened their claim to being legitimately representative. Many argued that it strengthened the propensity for collaborative and consensual deliberation rather than adversarial debate of the sort seen in the legislature.

- *Narrow and clear mandate*

The Assembly was charged with considering the electoral system defined simply as “the manner in which voters’ ballots are translated into seats in the Legislative Assembly.” Other issues, however germane to electoral competition, were excluded.

This focused the Assembly on a specific task and allowed it to develop and work to a manageable agenda. If the Assembly chose to make a recommendation for change they had to do so by recommending one specific alternative which would be “described clearly and in detail.” This helped to concentrate the Assembly’s attention. By requiring that a change recommendation had to be specific and detailed, the mandate ensured that Assembly members would have to develop a fairly sophisticated knowledge of electoral systems. They would, in effect, have to do hard intellectual work rather than simply choosing between systems based on general textbook descriptions or staff presentations.

- *Any recommendation to go to public referendum*

This feature of the Assembly plan gave Assembly members a strong sense of responsibility and motivation. They knew they were being watched by their fellow citizens and that their report would not simply end up neglected on some government library shelf. This led to all its work being public so that voters would be able to see the basis and process that led to any recommendation.

- *Full independence from government*

Not only were active politicians (and their agents) excluded from participation but the Chair (agreed to unanimously by the legislature) was given complete authority (and financial resources) to appoint staff, recruit members and lead the Assembly. As it happened there was never even any suspicion of government interference or direction throughout the entire exercise.

With the plan in place the legislature unanimously agreed to the government’s nomination of Jack Blaney as Assembly chair. A former President of Simon Fraser University, Blaney had been instrumental in the establishment of its Wosk Centre for Dialogue and had a passionate commitment to adult education and public dialogue. Described by the Premier as both “a conceptual thinker and a consensus builder” he proved to have the right balance of skills to develop a dedicated (but non-partisan⁹) staff and to lead 160 disparate citizens through the year-long work.

The BC Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform

Recruiting 160 citizens to participate in a year-long public policy process on a subject of tangential interest to most presented a challenge. The Assembly’s staff¹⁰ had the province’s Chief Electoral Officer select names from the voters list in each of the seventy-nine electoral districts. The names

were drawn at random with provisions for equal numbers of men and women and stratified by cohorts matching the age distribution of the district. Those so selected were sent letters informing them of their opportunity to participate in the Assembly and inviting them to indicate their interest. Those that responded positively were eligible to attend a local community meeting where they heard a detailed presentation about the scope and obligations of the project and again asked if they still wished to be considered. Those who signaled willingness had their names placed in a hat and one man and one woman's name was then drawn for each electoral district. When it was discovered that no members of First Nations communities had been chosen, a subsequent draw of individuals who had attended selection meeting was held to add one man and one woman from that population.

The process saw 23,034 initial information letters sent out to inform the selected individuals about the Assembly and indicating the eligibility requirements.¹¹ Only 1715 individuals (7.4%) responded to this first invitation so there was obviously a high degree of self-selection at that point. Of those, 1441 were invited to one of the 27 local selection meetings held around the province: 1105 (76.7%) accepted the invitation and 964 (66.9%) actually attended. Thus, of the over twenty-three thousand individuals randomly drawn by the BC Electoral Officer's computer, 4.2% ultimately came to a selection meeting at which the final 160 (0.7%) were chosen to be members of the Assembly.¹² The self-selection involved – first to respond to the initial information letter, second to accept an invitation to a local meeting, and then third to allow one's name to go into the hat – appears to have produced a strong commitment to the project. Only one member dropped out before the end of the year-long exercise was completed.

This protracted selection process produced an Assembly that was evenly gender-balanced and somewhat more age representative than the voters list itself.¹³ Like the provincial population, the Assembly had a diverse multi-cultural and linguistic cast with members coming from all kinds of working, middle class and professional occupations. Given that the Assembly was to start with a learning phase designed to introduce members to the variety and mechanics of alternate electoral systems, the educational backgrounds of members was potentially important. And it was extraordinarily varied: members with only a few years of elementary schooling, often decades ago in another country, found themselves sitting beside colleagues who had advanced university training, one with a doctorate in theoretical physics from Oxford University.

Despite the diverse and broadly representative character of the membership, the opportunity for self-selection in the recruitment process had the potential to generate an Assembly of individuals who already had strong views about the electoral system and a propensity for reform that was not typical of the wider electorate. The data in Table 1 allows us to explore the extent to which this was the case. They are taken from a series of surveys of Assembly members conducted at various stages of the process: data describing the views of the wider electorate come from a rolling cross-section conducted between the release of the Assembly's final report and recommendations and the May 2005 referendum.¹⁴ As they gathered to begin their work (col. 1), Assembly members did not describe themselves as particularly political – on a 0-10 scale they rated their average interest in politics at 6.9 though that was somewhat higher than the average reported by the public.¹⁵ Members judged themselves even less informed about politics (6.0) and considerably less informed (.44) on the subject of electoral systems.

Most of the people recruited to participate in the Assembly were not far wrong when they gave themselves a low rating on their existing knowledge of electoral systems. Few had any real understanding about the variety or the working of electoral systems used in other democracies. When asked, 63% said they could not name a country that used a proportional (defined in terms as vote

percentages “about the same” as seat percentages) electoral system, 84% could not name a country where voters got to rank order candidates, and 60% could not name a country where electors got two votes – one for the party and one for a candidate.

Although the new Assembly members claimed to be only moderately interested in politics, they were uncharacteristically active citizens. Virtually all reported having voted in the previous provincial and federal elections as compared to 71 and 63% of the BC electorate. Most (87%) indicated that they were involved in some form of volunteer work with more than one (the average was 2.4) community or professional organization. And they were hardly passive participants for the vast majority (83%) of them had taken a leadership role in their group or association. This suggests that these were individuals with high levels of social capital that provided the basis for their decision to take part in the Assembly.

These high levels of civic engagement did not translate into high levels of satisfaction with the state of British Columbia’s democracy or the working of the electoral system. Table 1 indicates that only a minority of Assembly members described themselves as satisfied with either. This was in sharp contrast to substantial majorities in the public who declared themselves satisfied. Here, perhaps, is evidence that the self-selection dimension of the recruitment procedures may have led to larger numbers of more dissatisfied individuals being recruited into the Assembly process. However, these new Assembly members appeared to be agnostic – or perhaps they were simply declaring themselves open-minded – on the question of what electoral system would be best for BC: 83% reported that they had no preferred system for the province.

Any decision about an electoral system ultimately needs to rest upon a set of values that can be articulated in terms of principles that structure an institutional design. Table 1 reports the views of both members and the public on three such principles that were critical to the citizens’ assembly reform exercise in British Columbia. First there is the question of proportionality. As Shugart (2006) rightly notes, proportional representation (PR) systems operate on “opposing principles of representation” to constituency-based winner-take-all systems. It is striking therefore that, knowing little about other actual electoral systems, 69% of the new Assembly members (and two-thirds of the wider electorate) expressed clear support for the proportional principle. At the same time, reflecting the geographic impulses that have long been central to Canadian political practice, 95% indicated that they believed voters needed a strong MLA to defend local interests. Here were the seeds of a tension that would lie at the heart of the Assembly’s struggle to decide what sort of electoral system it ought to recommend for the province. Shugart (p14) argues that “one of the most anomalous outcomes possible in plurality elections is the reversed plurality that produces a spurious majority.” Assembly members thought it was more than anomalous – 89% reported that it was ‘unacceptable’, a proportion not much different from that in the general public.

As the Assembly started it had a membership which was demographically reasonably representative of the province. Though they were active citizens, most appeared to be generally dissatisfied with the system but were relatively clear and agreed upon the principles that should underlie a more acceptable one. What they lacked was much information or knowledge about the real world of electoral systems and thus they were unable to identify a preferred alternative to the existing single-member plurality institution. The first two phases of the Assembly’s work were designed to change this.

Learning about Electoral Systems

Before they could debate and decide about what electoral system would be best for British Columbia, the Assembly's citizen membership had to learn about both the working of the first-past-the-post systems (while most knew how voting was conducted many knew little else about the details of the electoral, legislative and constitutional system within which it was nested) and the range of alternate electoral systems available. To help them do this, the staff organized six residential weekends in Vancouver spread over January to the end of March – a kind of political science boot camp. Supported by David Farrell's comparative text on *Electoral Systems* (2001), they provided a series of plenary presentations supplemented by regular discussion groups and occasional talks by visiting experts on specific topics. For most members this was a daunting agenda and only half could say at the end of the first weekend that they felt confident they were going to be able to cope with the material: by the end of the six-weekend learning phase about 15% were still not confident. About 10% later reported that they had "seriously considered withdrawing from the Assembly" at one time or another but none did so – an indication of the collective commitment members appear to have made to the project and to one another.¹⁶

The learning phase has been described in detail elsewhere (see Ratner, 2004, 2005 and the Assembly's *Technical Report*). One feature that bears notice is the members' claim that of nine different learning activities they engaged in over the period (ranging from plenary presentations through discussion in small groups, personal study and web forums) the general lectures from the research staff were the most useful. This reflects the low information base from which most started for it was those lectures which provided members with a foundation on which to build. But it also raises the possibility that their final decision was then overly influenced by the views and preferences of the staff. In the post-Assembly questionnaire members were asked if they thought "the presentation of options by the Assembly staff was biased" and whether "the Assembly's research staff had a preference about which electoral system would be best for BC". Eighty-eight percent of those responding said they thought the presentations were unbiased; their views about the staff's own preferences were more mixed. Thirty-five percent said they didn't think the staff had a preference, 29% thought they did, and 32% claimed they didn't know. However, those who believed staff had a preference were not agreed: many said STV (the Assembly's final recommendation), others said MMP (the option the Assembly rejected), but many simply appeared to believe that anyone who studied the subject must have a preference. One member summed up this position saying: "Everyone has their own opinion. So of course they had one. Which? I don't know." Thus there is no evidence to suggest that members were led to a decision by an opinionated staff.

In fact, members did an extraordinary amount of work and research on their own. One member 'translated' Farrell's book into 'simple' English, another devised a program to run hundreds of computer simulations of alternate electoral system scenarios, others did web research, and many organized public discussions and events in their communities: all shared what they were doing with their fellow Assembly members. Not surprisingly then, Table 1 (col. 2) reports a number of dramatic changes in the membership by the mid-point of their work. They reported considerably higher levels of interest in and information about politics generally while their expressed level of satisfaction with the existing system (a product of their learning how it worked?) dropped sharply. There were not particularly marked shifts in their views about what basic principles ought to structure an electoral system but there was a dramatic change in their knowledge of such systems. The average score of members' sense of being informed about electoral systems more than doubled and on the harder tests – ability to identify specific countries which had experience with different kinds of systems – it was

clear that they had learned a great deal. In their discussion groups members were analyzing and comparing the intricacies of a wide range of systems with confidence and aplomb.

The learning sessions were followed by a set of 50 public hearings held across the province. All members attended those in their home district and most went to at least one in another corner of the province – often in a community they had never visited before. Members hoped that these meetings would give them a clear indication of what the public wanted in an electoral system. Instead they quickly discovered that most members of the public knew far less about the details of electoral systems than they (i.e. they were like the members had been when they started) but that there was a marked appetite for change. It seems likely that these hearings attracted disproportionate numbers of those who wanted to see a change to the electoral system. Ultimately they served to convince Assembly members that a recommendation for change would be welcome but that the members themselves would have to do the hard work of designing and deciding upon the details of an alternative themselves.

As they came to the end of this first half of their work members were reflecting on a wide range of criteria by which they might make an assessment about electoral systems. Asked to rank nine different criteria on a seven-point scale (with 7 = extremely important and 1 = not important) members produced the following average ratings:

Choice for the voter	4.99
Electoral accountability	4.89
Parliamentary check on government	4.85
Effective government	4.77
Encouragement to participate	4.62
Equality of the vote	4.51
Fair representation of parties/groups (<i>i.e. PR</i>)	4.41
Democratic political parties	4.21
Identifiable local representation	3.86

This data suggests that members did not attach greatly different weights to these criteria – on the seven point scale the range of differences was only 1.13. However these modest differences disguised rather different distributions of opinion among Assembly members. Figure 1 illustrates the differences on the criteria apparently deemed most and least important – voter choice and local representation. It reveals that there was much greater consensus on the value of voter choice than on local representation. While both would prove to be critical criteria for members, the greater differences on local representation would ultimately make discussion of it a critical element in the Assembly’s decision-making. Attitudes on voter choice remained stable (and important) but, as we shall see, shifting views about the importance of local representation may have been central to the final decision to adopt a recommendation in favour of STV.

The learning phase also led to Assembly members developing clear views about the respective merits of different kinds of electoral systems. When asked to rate the basic families “in terms of how good you personally think each system would be for BC” on a seven-point scale (7 = very good, 1 = very bad) members had no difficulty ranking them:

Mixed, proportional (MMP)	5.40
Single Transferable Vote	5.16
Mixed, STV/AV	5.11
PR, open list	4.89
Majority, alternate (preferential) vote	3.67
Mixed, additional (MMM)	3.61
PR, closed list	3.44
Plurality, multi-member	3.32
Plurality, single member	3.10
Majority, two rounds of voting	2.75

Obviously their comparative assessments found the existing first-past-the post system wanting and they expressed a marked preference for systems with proportional and preferential features. By the end of the learning phase just over half claimed that that they now had a preferred electoral system (up from 17% at the beginning), and while 69% thought it very likely that the Assembly would reach a consensus the large majority thought it would be difficult (53%) or very difficult (43%) to do so. They knew that the trade-offs among the competing principles were not going to be easy in the final decision stage.

Choosing an Electoral System

The mandate of the Assembly required that if it was to recommend a change in the electoral system it had to present a detailed alternative. Simply recommending ‘proportional representation’ or ‘preferential voting’ would not be acceptable. The principle was that for a recommendation to go to referendum the electorate would have to know precisely what it was voting on and, if it passed, the legislature would have to know what had been agreed to. Recognizing a wide support for change among the members and the public, the Assembly decided to first identify the key principles that it believed needed to be institutionalized as part of the fundamental structure of in an electoral system. These were:

- *Voter Choice*
This element reflected the members’ constant ranking of increased or maximum choice for individual voters as their most highly regarded value. It was to be articulated in a system with preferential or multiple ballots.
- *Proportionality*
Members strongly believed that the first-past-the-post system was inherently unfair because it provided no direct or logical connection between vote and seat shares. They believed some degree of proportionality was desirable although there were differences among members about just how proportional a system needed to be to be fair.
- *Local representation*
There was less consensus about the importance of local representation than other value (hence its lower average score reported above, see Fig 1) among Assembly members. Many, especially those from rural and sparsely populated areas, believed it an essential element of any acceptable system; some urban members thought it a completely spurious issue. Debate on this principle was ongoing and individual members’ estimates of its importance varied considerably over time (Blais, Carty & Fournier, forthcoming). Ultimately, members accepted that local representation would have to be a structural feature of any system on which they might reach a consensus.

Voter choice had always been rated highly as a criterion by which to assess an electoral system but both PR and local representation had been further down the list. However as they approached the task of designing an alternative electoral system, members focused the structural elements they could shape directly rather than possible indirect consequences. Their immediate challenge was to determine what system would provide an acceptable balance between their three sometimes competing elements. The decision that all three would have to be accommodated allowed Assembly members to rule out majority systems, given their lack of proportionality, and PR list systems, given their weakness in providing for local representation. This left Mixed Member Proportional and Single Transferable Vote systems as the two likely alternative types. Figure 2, which charts Assembly members' comparative rankings over time, indicates that through the first months of the Assembly there was a marked preference for MMP over STV. However it was also the case that well into the process a third or more of the members did not rate one of those systems better than the other. However, in the final deliberative stage of the Assembly a major shift occurred – the number with no preference dropped and, as the debate sharpened, STV emerged as a clear winner over MMP. When it came to a final vote to decide between the two, the members ended up choosing STV by a 4:1 ratio.

In making this choice individual members appear to have been governed by their views on the three principles they wanted to see in an electoral system. A detailed statistical analysis of members' views reveals that those who gave priority to the value of *voter choice* preferred STV with its preferential ballot.¹⁷ That predilection had emerged by the mid-point of the Assembly process and persisted until the end. By the time members came to make their decision, those who gave priority to the *proportional* principle had come to believe that their MMP model was not going to be intrinsically fairer (i.e. more proportional) than their STV plan. This reflected both the specific features of the MMP system they thought would be acceptable – a 3% province-wide threshold and regionalized lists – and the computer analysis one member conducted comparing the experience of other MMP and STV systems. Thus views on proportionality, while clearly important, played little part in structuring the Assembly's choice. The big change was in the assessment of the place of *local representation* in electoral politics. Members who were concerned with it moved to support STV as they realized that MMP would reduce the absolute number of local electoral district representatives while STV would regroup them into identifiable multi-member districts.¹⁸ Thus STV ultimately became the choice of the Assembly partly because MMP ceased to be perceived as fairer, and partly because STV became the choice of those for whom local representation was particularly salient. This latter group may have been slow to decide that STV offered them the better of the two alternatives but when they did their preferences were critical to shaping the Assembly's final recommendation.

The STV Choice

In comparing MMP and STV Shugart observes that “most of the jurisdictions opting for reform are opting for MMP” and he goes on to suggest that STV “is arguably a more radical reform.” This judgment that MMP might be preferred is supported by the decisions by experts and independent commissioners in three other Canadian provinces to recommend MMP as the best reform option (Carty 2006). Political scientists would appear to agree: Shaun Bowler and David Farrell's (2005) survey of specialists on electoral systems leads them to conclude that “regardless of how you cut it, mixed-member proportional is the preferred choice of electoral system experts” (p 7). This leads us to ask why this assembly of ordinary citizens, after months of educating themselves and debating the merits of these and other electoral systems, opted for the ‘more radical’ reform option.

The Assembly's first decision, to reject list PR or Majoritarian systems was easy. It reflected the members' views that an acceptable electoral system had to accommodate and balance the competing principles of proportionality and territorial representation. If the choice was thus reduced to MMP or STV the question then became which of the two provided the best trade-off amongst those principles. The reasoning of the experts prove to be of little help for, as Bowler et al. observe, their "preference for MMP . . . is unmistakable, but the reasons for that preference, and for preferring MMP over list-systems or STV, are not nearly so clear cut (p 15)" and STV remains a distinctly second choice. A clue to the differing judgments of experts and Assembly citizens lies in the criteria they apply. While the experts rated nine different desirable properties of electoral systems it is striking that 'voter choice' – the property that was consistently rated the most important by the ordinary voters who constituted the Assembly – was not among them. And it may be that this is why Bowler and colleagues found few "clear normative preferences that drive preferences for . . . STV and MMP amongst their respondents.

As we have seen it a trade-off among the three values of proportionality, local representation and voter choice that drove the BC Assembly's final decision. But proportionality became the least important of the three when it became clear that the need for a threshold (to exclude fragment parties) and regional lists (an echo of the concern for geographic representation in a province where some single-member districts were already bigger than England) made any acceptable BC MMP system unlikely to be significantly more proportional than STV. In that situation the voter choice and local representation preoccupations made STV a clear favourite and ultimately the overwhelming choice of the Assembly.

Voter choice rarely shows up in the list of criteria by which electoral systems are assessed in the literature. Bowler and Farrell's experts were not asked about it. Pippa Norris's book on *Electoral Engineering* casts the problem in terms of adversarial vs. consensual democracy and appears to squeeze the voter out completely. Yet when ordinary voters are asked to think about what they want in an electoral system they may well put their interest in more and varied ballot choice well ahead of political scientists' traditional concerns for values such as 'ensuring stable government,' 'strong cohesive parties,' or 'ensuring coalition government.' Farrell and Gallagher (1999) discovered this to be the case in a series of focus group discussions with British voters and, it was clearly important to the ordinary voters who made up the BC Assembly.

As Shugart rightly notes, STV requires that "elected members must compete not only against candidates of other parties, but also typically against candidates of their own party". From the political scientist's perspective this "requires voters to rank candidates," from the voters perspective this *offers* voters more choice and stimulates politicians to pay more attention to their representative roles. From the voters standpoint this may be less of a radical change than an overdue rebalancing of the electoral system to increase their democratic choice. Those who have defined the mandate of the forthcoming Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform have included voter choice ("the electoral system should promote voter choice in terms of quality and quality of options available to the voters") as one of eight criteria for its members. That Assembly's choices will tell us much about whether the BC experience was idiosyncratic, or whether voters really do assess electoral systems differently than political elites and those who study them.

Electoral Reform in British Columbia?

When the Assembly had first been created the government had wanted to do more than simply respond to the 'anomalous' results of the two previous elections. It intended to provide an opportunity

for the public as a whole to pass judgment on what kind of politics it wanted for the indefinite future and saw this as requiring more than a simple majority. After internal debate the government proposed a standard of 60% acceptance for any change. Liberal caucus members do not appear to have seen this as a mechanism for ensuring defeat: many apparently expected a recommendation for change and one that would pass that threshold.¹⁹ At the same time it was agreed that there ought to be a second criteria for acceptance, namely that any recommendation win majority approval in 60% of the electoral districts. The clear intent of this was to ensure the natural urban majority in the Victoria and Vancouver districts would not be able to impose its will on the rest of the province. The legislature responded by amending the province's referendum act to establish this new higher, double-standard for success.

The Assembly's recommendation that the province should adopt an STV electoral system led directly to a referendum at the time (May 17, 2005) of the provincial general election. The Yes/No question, drafted by the Assembly, was "*Should British Columbia change to the BC-STV electoral system as recommended by the Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform?*" The result was clear: 57.7% of those voting said Yes, and the question received majority support in 77 of the province's 79 electoral districts. Thus the referendum, despite having easily met the second test had narrowly failed the first, and so was declared lost. In the aftermath, the newly returned government recognized the broad support for change and Premier Campbell announced there would be another referendum. Recognizing that not all citizens had learned much about the proposal, and its implications for their representation, he pledged that for the next referendum there would be public funds available to support (For and Against) publicity campaigns and that voters would have the benefit of a map indicating how STV electoral districts would be structured.

Gibson's original report establishing the basic plan for the Assembly process argued that "there is no need for "Yes" and "No" [referendum campaign] committees" on the grounds that "political parties, academics and pundits will no doubt provide for all the debate required." That proved to be a serious misreading. When it created the Assembly, the government made it clear that it would not be taking a position on any recommendation. This echoed the Premier's clearly defined position that the electoral system was a matter for citizens, not the party politicians who had a direct and personal stake in it. As a consequence the Liberal party and cabinet took no position on the issue. Some caucus members spoke out both for and against the recommendation during the campaign in their local district while others simply argued that they were strong supporters of the Assembly process itself.

With the government silent on the substance of the issue, the main opposition party, the New Democrats opted to do the same. The party was preoccupied with rebuilding after the electoral debacle of 2001 and had only one incumbent MLA standing for election. Thus they had no established caucus position and while their leader had advocated change to a more proportional system at one of the Assembly's small town public hearings she had been silent on details. With individual party members likely divided on the issue, the New Democrats took advantage of the Liberals silence to do the same. As a consequence the issue quickly disappeared and received little attention in the media war between the main parties. For its part the Green party (which had captured 12% of the vote in 2001 and was seen by some as relevant political force) spoiled its opportunity to send a clear message when its leader, disappointed in the Assembly's preference for STV over MMP, announced she would lead a campaign against the recommendation only to be forced to back down by large numbers of party members keen on any kind of proportional system.

The media attempted to generate some interest in the issue: the press provided coverage of the Assembly and its preferred STV system with most major newspapers ultimately recommending a Yes

vote. With few resources, small groups of advocates and opponents staged a rather low-key campaign and the Assembly members themselves emerged as perhaps the most aggressive campaigners for their recommendation. They quickly formed an alumni group and 88% of them reported taking an active part in the campaign: 15 indicated they had given 20 or more public talks in the five month period between the release of the report and referendum day while many reported doing radio & TV interviews, writing letters, staging debates as well as other events to capture attention.²⁰

The real black hole in this entire reform process was the large numbers of British Columbians who simply did not know about it. Despite the best efforts of those in favour of change, the absence of a high profile campaign meant 44% of the electorate claimed to know nothing about BC-STV by the time of the referendum vote. This was crucial for, as Cutler and Johnston (forthcoming) demonstrate, “the more they [the electorate] knew, the more they voted Yes”, although the path to voting yes appears to have been different for the populists and the non-populists in the electorate. Though learning about the Assembly as well as its proposed electoral system was important to the vote decisions of both, there was “a sharp contrast in the relative weight of the Assembly’s composition and the expertise it developed.” Populists in the electorate dwelt on the fact that the Assembly was made of ‘ordinary’ people like them, not on any claim to having become experts in the subject: the reverse was the case for the non-populists. The evidence strongly supports a conclusion that it was the Assembly, as the agenda-setter, that produced the strong Yes vote, even if it did so differently for different groups of voters.

By 2009, the story of the 160 citizens who spent between 30 and 50 days of their life in 2004²¹ thinking and debating about what kind of electoral system would be best for the province is likely to be remembered by few. Whether it will still serve as an agenda-setter capable of moving voter choice remains to be seen. Thus the future of electoral reform may well depend not simply on voters’ judgments about STV, but on their knowledge of the process and the citizens who put it on the ballot.

Table 1 Views of Citizens' Assembly Members¹

	1 Pre- Assembly	2 Mid- Assembly	3 Post- Assembly	BC Public (Post-Assembly)
Self-assessment of general politicization*				
interest in politics	6.9	8.5	7.5	5.7**
informed about politics	6.0	7.7	6.8	
informed about electoral systems	4.4	9.1	8.6	
General satisfaction with existing system[†]				
satisfied with BC democracy	46	30	33	66
satisfied with BC electoral system	35	19	14	68
No preferred electoral system for BC[†]	83			
Knowledge of alternate electoral systems[†]				
unable to ID a PR country	63	4	0.8	
unable to ID a preferential vote country	84	6	0	
Unable to ID a 2-vote country	60	8	5	
Specific views on electoral system principles[†]				
seats should be proportional to votes	69	80	90	66
strong MLAs needed to defend local interests	95	70	83	
'spurious majorities' unacceptable	89	80	88	81

1 Don't knows or no responses have been excluded in the calculations reported

* mean based on a 0-10 scale

** question asked specifically about interest in BC politics: those for Assembly members simply mentioned politics

† percentages

Figure 1 Assembly Members' Assessment of Electoral System Criteria at Mid-point

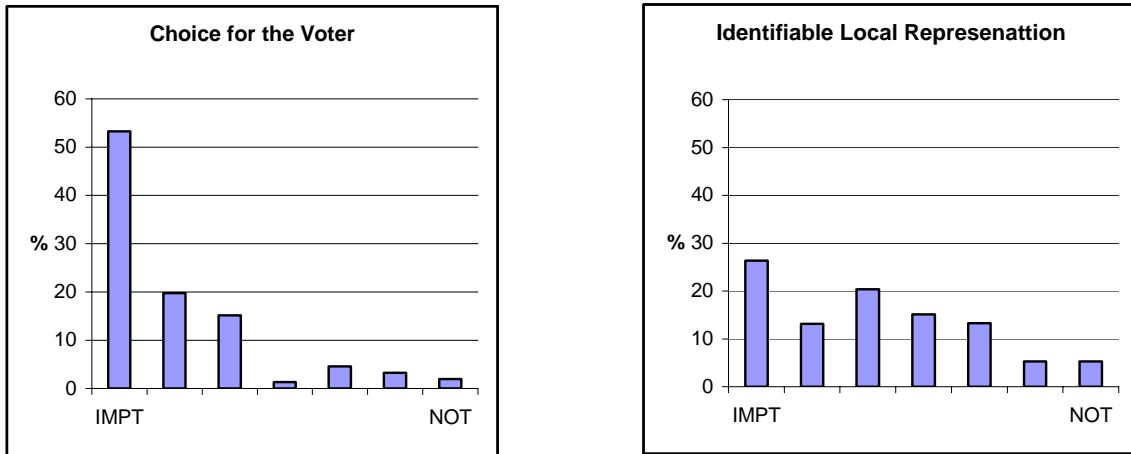
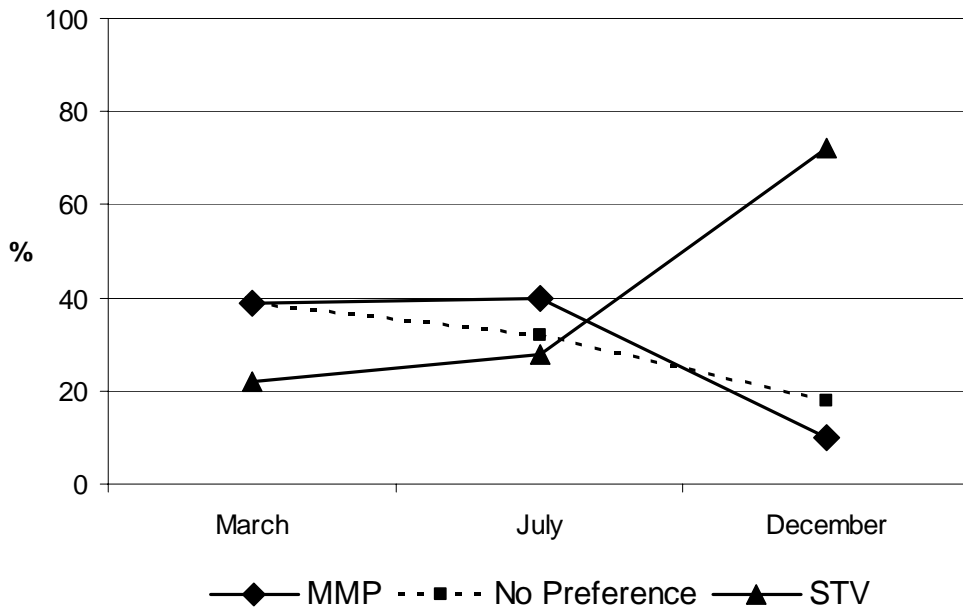


Figure 2 Assembly Members' Preferences for MMP or STV



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¹ MLA – a Member of the (provincial) Legislative Assembly. There is no common appellation for this office across the Canadian provinces and a variety of other titles are in use. The government’s manifesto, to which the Premier referred, was known as the *New Era* document.

² See the debate reported in the British Columbia *Hansard* for April 30, 2003.

³ For excerpts from the debate see Campbell et al.

⁴ This paragraph draws on conversations with a number of those involved in these early informal activities and discussions.

⁵ Earlier discussions had referred to constituent assemblies – Campbell appears to have been the first to use the term “citizens’ assembly”.

⁶ The discussion here, and later in the text, on the role and response of the caucus at different stages draws on confidential interviews with involved members.

⁷ When plans were subsequently being made for the Dutch government’s *Burgerforum* and the Ontario Citizens’ Assembly, both jurisdictions drew heavily on the BC model and experience.

⁸ G. Gibson, Report on the Constitution of the Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform, Dec. 23, 2002. The report can be found on the Assembly website at: <http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca/public/inaction/history>. Gibson had recommended 79 members (one per electoral district) and suggested some top-up members might have to be appointed to ensure representativeness. The government was opposed to the appointment principle so doubled the proposed size of the Assembly to enhance the prospects of achieving a representative Assembly with a random draw process. In the end two additional members were randomly drawn to guarantee First Nations participation. Together with the chair this meant there were 161 members in total.

⁹ Non-partisan in the sense that the staff never betrayed any sense of what they might have felt was an appropriate electoral system for British Columbia.

¹⁰ The permanent, full-time staff ultimately included the Chair, a Director and Associate Director of Research, a Director and Associate Director of Communications, a Chief Operations Officer and Office Manager, and five support staff who aided in all areas of the work.

¹¹ The Assembly was designed to be as inclusive as possible – members had to be BC residents on the voters list and able to use the English language. The only exclusions were for holders of a number of clearly specified political positions.

¹² Full details of the selection process can be found in its *Technical Report*.

¹³ Data on age distributions are in the Technical Report, p 40.

¹⁴ The member surveys were conducted by the authors at the time of the Assembly. All together there were 13 surveys of Assembly members – three major mail questionnaires done before, at the mid-point and after the Assembly as well as 9 short questionnaires completed at Assembly meetings and 1 telephone survey conducted after the referendum. The rolling cross-section was conducted by telephone with heavier releases in the weeks adjacent to the election. It was done by the authors with F. Cutler and R. Johnston of UBC.

¹⁵ The questions were slightly different for that put to the public referred specifically to BC politics while that to the Assembly members referred to politics in general and this may account for some of the variation.

¹⁶ The Assembly reported only one drop-out. That occurred as it started its deliberative sessions in September.

¹⁷ This paragraph draws heavily on the analysis in Blais et al.

¹⁸ Members perceived politicians from geographically identifiable local districts to be ‘local’ in a way that those on a party list (even if regionalized) would not be.

¹⁹ Here I am relying on confidential interviews. Some suggest that many caucus members expected an MMP recommendation (a system the Greens had been promoting and perhaps the only other one they knew) and believed it would attract much support.

²⁰ It should be noted that 4 members reported taking part in the campaign on the No side.

²¹ Members spent 26 days in formal Assembly gatherings and, on average, another 3 at public hearings. For many there was considerable travel time associated with those meetings. In addition many spent hundreds of hours in private research, engaged in the members’ website forum discussions, and a host of other individually-driven activities. Discussions with members make it clear that estimates of up to 50 days worth of time are no exaggeration.