
Values-Driven Electoral Reform – Conference Summary

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In mid-November 2006, the School of Policy Studies at Queen’s University and the Ontario Citizens’ Assembly Secretariat on Electoral Reform co-sponsored a conference to explore how values are reflected in choosing an electoral system. In addition to the Chair, George Thomson, two other members of the Ontario Citizens’ Assembly participated in the conference. Other participants included Canadian scholars, representatives of Fair Vote Canada and leading electoral reform experts from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand. Many of these experts had just spent the weekend with the 104 members of the Ontario Citizens’ Assembly, sharing their knowledge of and experience with electoral reform in different countries. I represented CPRN at the conference reflecting our interest in citizen engagement processes that are designed to understand citizens’ values and trade-offs when considering important public policy decisions.

Key note speaker Richard Katz, (Professor of Political Science at John Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland) had some insightful comments to set the stage, drawing on his study of electoral systems around the world. The overall thrust of his remarks was “*It depends.*” There are no easy answers. Choosing, designing and implementing the right kind of electoral system for any jurisdiction depends on any number of considerations about complex issues and involves trade-offs in values. This message was reiterated by other speakers throughout the course of the conference. The discussion and perspectives shared during the conference offer informative insights for Ontarians and citizens elsewhere as they consider which electoral system best suits their needs. Building on the summation by Tom Axworthy, (Centre for the Study of Democracy, Queen’s University), I took away four major sub-themes from the discussion (outlined below). The conference agenda and some of the presentations can be found at: www.queensu.ca/sps/the_policy_forum/conferences/. You can learn more about the Ontario Citizens’ Assembly at www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca.

Key Themes

1. There Is No Perfect Electoral System

The electoral system that any society chooses must reflect the values that society considers most important, recognizing that some trade-offs in values are necessary. Context matters very much and must be considered when exploring electoral systems. Choices depend on a variety of factors: who you are, where you are and what you value most are – all important considerations.

- **Who you are:** Our political history, traditions and cultures must be understood and factored into an electoral system. Canadians need to consider our roots in the Westminster system; our status as a federation with 14 different electoral jurisdictions; a federally appointed Senate; our past experience with minority/majority governments; our practice or lack of it with coalitions governments; and so on.
- **Where you are:** What is the current environment, what isn't working, and why is change desirable? In Canada, newcomers bring a diversity of cultures and electoral traditions from many parts of the world. We need to think about the role of women in society, the democratic deficit and decline in traditional political participation including voting and political party membership and other factors in assessing what is and isn't working with our current electoral system and understanding why change is or is not desirable.
- **What you value most:** What values determine our choice of electoral system? Fairness? Efficiency? Some values go together, some cannot. We need to choose an electoral system based on what we most want it to do. A first past the post system can maximize efficiency; a proportional representation system can maximize fairness. Sarah Birch, from the University of Essex, noted that in emerging democracies making the transition from proletariat systems, where there are new elites, unformed Party systems, and an uncertain future, fairness trumps all other values.
- Key questions that help to understand value choices are:
 - Why change? What values motivate change? Are there concerns over accountability, fairness, scandal?
 - How to change? Who sets the agenda? Who drafts the new system? Who ultimately decides? Values need to be taken into consideration when designing electoral systems and when designing process and institutions to decide.
 - Change to what? What system best reflects the values we have chosen as most important? Values are important when deciding whether or not to change from the status quo.

2. The Electoral System Is Just One Piece of the Puzzle

Creating an electoral system that best reflects the values most important to a society is not, in itself, enough to address the democratic deficit. How we elect legislative representatives will not be a panacea for all that ails our democratic institutions and practices. The interrelationship between our institutions and practices is very complex, and it will be very hard to predict how changes in one will affect others. Some interesting points that were raised include:

- It is important to look at the Canadian system as a whole. Compared to many other jurisdictions, we currently have strong centralized control, where party discipline is relatively strict. The system is organized around party government, yet there is a decline in the legitimacy of how our party system works.
- Parliament is strongest when minority governments are seen as an accepted state of affairs, not just a holding pattern until a majority is achieved.
- An important lesson from other countries is not to exaggerate the degree to which changing the electoral system will change other things. Consideration also must be given to both the impact on and possible changes required to political party nominating processes, policies and cultures, and party financing rules. Other factors that are closely tied to the electoral system include parliamentary structures and practices – the role of committees, and free votes.
- How will the behaviour of the electorate change under new rules? How will politicians change? How will political culture change? It will take time to understand all the impacts of electoral reform.

3. Political Leadership Is Essential

This includes ensuring means and resources for public education about electoral reform proposals. There were a number of observations about how rare it is for politicians to agree to explore changing the existing electoral system, yet leadership from the top is an essential factor in those instances where it has happened.

- The barrier to electoral reform posed by the “Power of Incumbency” is well recognized.
- An issue raised for further exploration is the need to better understand what conditions enabled Premiers Gordon Campbell in British Columbia and Dalton McGuinty in Ontario to launch reviews of the electoral system and give citizens the task of exploring and making decisions about fundamental aspects of our democracy.
- Ken Carty, University of British Columbia and former Director of Research for the 2004 British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform, noted that key success criteria for the CA were: random recruitment, balanced/representative members, the need to have an important task, independence from politicians/government, and significant power to influence decisions.

- It was recognized that changing the electoral system and other long-standing political practices is hard for political parties, as many scenarios can be seen to go against their best interests. Change is not as easy as rational choice theory – trying to predict political behaviour is predicting the unpredictable.
- As Katz pointed out, our political system is a human system. There is no totally mechanistic way to predict what will happen and there are no guarantees that desired changes will happen quickly or as anticipated.
- A new electoral system is unlikely to result in immediate changes, but will require several elections before it takes hold. Transition time is needed to understand the broader impacts of a new system.
- Dedicated resources for public education are needed to help the broader public understand the implications of a proposed or adopted system. They should also have a good understanding of the process used to determine and recommend a new system. The BC government has now committed funding for a public education campaign with resources for both the Yes and No sides, leading up to the 2009 referendum on electoral reform.
- Even after their official role ended, the British Columbia CA members continued to be very active in the referendum campaign, including establishing a Web site, and organizing a speakers bureau to share their knowledge with the electorate, despite the lack of any funding or mandate from the government.

4. Citizens' Deliberative Processes Need to be Part of a Renewed Democracy

There was a good deal of discussion at the conference about the importance of engaging citizens in shaping changes to our electoral systems, if reforms are to be a success.

- David Farrell, from the University of Manchester, offered lessons from experiences by past Irish, Dutch, and British governments that reinforce how electoral reform will be a non-starter if consultation is not undertaken.
- Ken Carty reported that CA members in British Columbia were transformed from passive voters to engaged citizens:
 - They were representative of the population, acquired knowledge;
 - Their discussions were rooted in values;
 - People did want to contribute to public policy decisions. CA members acquired knowledge and expertise and were quite able to balance public interest and private interests and short-term and long-term interests throughout their experience;
 - They had public's confidence; and
 - The group was interested, engaged and committed over a long process, giving much of their time and energy, spending weekends away from their families.
- Sarah Birch suggested imbedding citizen involvement from the bottom up by creating a mechanism that citizens could use to trigger a citizens' assembly process on an issue of importance, rather than being required to wait for politicians to decide one is required.

- Elizabeth McLeay, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand spoke of her country's experience with electoral reform, including making the system more responsive to the public in several ways:
 - More inclusiveness and respect for people's views;
 - Special measures for Maori (certain number of dedicated seats);
 - More effective parties;
 - More power to Parliamentary Committees;
 - Citizen submissions to parliament to suggest areas of study;
 - Groups of MPs consult citizens; and,
 - Public education about the new electoral system was given decent resources and led by a prestigious, neutral person; funding was provided for groups on either side of issue.
- Part of the Ontario CA process is the two phase Students' Assembly on Electoral Reform. The weekend after the conference, 103 high schools students gathered for five days to learn about electoral systems. The passion they brought to their discussions about what electoral system they would like to see in place surprised the organizers. The second phase of the program will involve over 200 schools and 10,000 students who will take part in classroom activities to learn about electoral systems and cast a vote for the one they think would best serve Ontario's needs. Young people will present the final results of the Students' Assembly to the Citizens' Assembly in February. More information on the students' assembly is available on the Citizens' Assembly Web site.

Conclusion

Of particular interest to CPRN was the degree to which conference participants saw potential in the deliberative processes as part of the toolbox for democratic renewal. In our view, deliberative processes are an effective way of deepening public involvement beyond the vote. The two members of the Ontario Citizens' Assembly who participated in the conference reinforced this theme. They indicated that they were honoured to be part of the Assembly, noting it is history in the making, because of the importance of modelling a process to engage ordinary people in decision-making. Their experience, and that of the members of the BC CA, is consistent with what we hear from the randomly recruited citizens who have participated in the deliberative dialogues CPRN has organized. People who have had the chance to participate in a deliberative process overwhelmingly appreciate their experience. This relates both to their sense of having contributed to decisions on issues of public concern, as well as to their greater awareness of and interest in political and policy issues.

The participants' contributions and sense of efficacy, coupled with growing interest from academic and policy communities, bodes well for citizen deliberative processes to become an increasingly accepted and expected part of our political landscape.