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Voters to have two choices

Thomas sold on benefits of plan

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Ontario voters will decide in the October election whether to adopt a revamped electoral system that advocates say will give the province a more co-operative government and could prompt electoral change across the country.

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A citizens' assembly, appointed by the government last year, overwhelmingly decided yesterday that the referendum question put to voters in the Oct. 10 election should ask whether they want to adopt the system used in Germany and New Zealand called "mixed member proportional."

"Here was a chance to present a system that truly represents all of Ontario and we all wanted to give Ontarians a chance to change it. We took a secret ballot and vote and that's how it was determined," said Ann Thomas, the member representing Peterborough and the county.

Thomas said she and other mem-



Ann Thomas

bers were sold on the benefits of the proposed system.

"The first thing that attracted me to the system was that we have two votes. We can vote for a local person and for a party," she said.

"The second thing that appealed to me was the votes reflect the seat percentages more fairly. If, for example, the Conservatives receive 35 per cent of the vote, they get 35 per cent of the seats."



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Under the proposed system, voters would have two choices on a ballot – one for a local representative and another for a political party.

The number of seats in the legislature would swell from 103 to 129 – 90 politicians would be elected in enlarged ridings across the province using the current first-past-the-post system and another 39 would be appointed by parties from a public list of candidates according to the percentage of popular vote they received.

If Ontario voters decided to adopt the system, the province would likely have fewer single-party majority governments but would rather encourage parties to create majorities through coalitions.

“There are so many under represented groups. The reason for the increase in the legislature is to provide room for the smaller parties to have their input into our government,” Thomas said.

The 103-member assembly endorsed the system 94 votes to 8 with one member absent.

Edmund James, one of the few members who voted to stick with the status quo, said more work should be done to empower backbenchers rather than tinkering with how they are elected.

The question now is whether Ontarians will agree and whether there will be enough money provided by the government to adequately educate voters about their choices before the referendum on Oct. 10.

Thomas admits, the first reaction from many Ontarians when talking about increasing the legislature might be negative.

“There’s going to be a mixed bag of reactions. It will increase the legislature and when the general public hears that without explanation, the first reaction is a negative reaction,” she said. “Once everything is explained to them, which (Premier) Dalton McGuinty has promised funding to do this, I think voters will get onboard.”

Marie Bountrogianni, minister responsible for democratic renewal, said in a statement the government will “respect the decision” of Ontario voters and is committed to ensuring people can make an informed decision.

Critics worry the proposal is destined to fail because the government has set the bar at a 60 per cent majority needed to change the current voting system, with more than 50 per cent of ballots needing to be cast in at least 64 ridings.

– with files from CP