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OUR OPINION

Do we want what we think we want?



When it comes to politics in Canada, if you ask people if they want changes to “the system” they’ll usually respond with a pretty firm yes. Ask them what kind of changes they’d like to see and the support starts to fragment.

Which leaves us skeptical about whether the lengthy and admittedly noble exercise now looking at Ontario’s electoral system will really generate changes.

An SES Research/Osprey Media poll conducted early last month suggested a surprising number of people want change, 61 per cent, versus 34 per cent who say the system is fine. Six per cent were unsure or didn’t offer an opinion one way or the other.

Said SES president Nik Nanos of the poll: “It’s a huge number ... That suggests there’s a pretty significant appetite among Ontarians to see what can be done to make the system they use to elect politicians better.”

What’s interesting is the relative uniformity among segments of the population that support change. Sixty-four per cent of women and 57 per cent of men want change. The support for change by women could come from the desire to elect more women to government rather than support for wholesale move to a proportional representation system — the alternative most commonly associated with major change.

There’s little deviance among age groups, too, with all segments 18 years old and up showing from 59 to 64 per cent support for change.

Normally, when politicians see poll results that consistent, policy moves aren’t far behind.

But in this case, it may be all for naught.

Currently, Ontarians select 102 MPPs by majority vote in their ridings. That tends to generate more MPPs for the governing party than is reflected in its actual popular support. Last week’s Quebec election was an anomaly in that the number of seats each of the three parties won roughly matched their popular support.

To fulfil an election promise, Premier Dalton McGuinty set up an Assembly of 103 people — one from each riding, plus the chair — to tour the province to garner input and make recommendations about possible change.

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A lot of that public input leans towards a system of proportional representation, which would see more fringe parties elect candidates. The Green Party, for example, would have three MPPs based on its 2.8 per cent of the popular vote in the 2003 election.

But this kind of system can generate a lot of minority governments. Canadians generally like minorities, but a permanent minority, with all the political dealmaking that’s required to keep governments in power, would become tiresome before long and it’s hardly likely to change the public’s mind of politicians, given the compromises in party policies that would be required.

There are other possibilities, such as electing some MPPs, then have others drawn from party lists, based on the popular vote. While that’s more likely to generate a legislature that reflect voters’ actual opinions, it’s complicated, since voters never really know how their votes will be used in selecting MPPs from a list. Another idea is a ranking system for candidates, which sees votes transferred. That system was proffered in British Columbia during its last election, but it was impossibly complicated and voters rejected it.

The Citizens Assembly is expected to report to the legislature in a couple of months, followed by a public education campaign and a likely referendum on possible changes during the next provincial election.

Said Nanos of the various possibilities: “Although the numbers are positive (for electoral reform) the government should still be fairly cautious because depending on what the assembly recommends, it may not be in sync with what Ontarians want.”

Imagine that, ask Ontarians what they want and the answer may not actually represent what they want. Sounds like our current political system.

Unless the assembly can offer a simple system that will accurately reflect voters’ wishes without generating endless minorities, it will be a hard sell.

What do you think? Send us your opinion in a Letter to the Editor at 33 MacKenzie St., Sudbury, P3C 4Y1, or fax it to 674-6834 or e-mail it to letters@thesudburystar.com.