

Citizens' Assembly took us back to 'school'

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I have come full circle from bringing school children by bus to Queen's Park, to actually being brought there by bus myself and having the privilege of seeing the Legislature.

I have driven past this wonderful building many times, but had never been inside to see what it's all about. We as Ontarians should be proud of this beautiful building, its heritage and all that it stands for.

We at the Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform were able to see this handsome monument after hours, as we were waiting to have dinner with the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, James K. Bartleman. During the dinner, he told us of the different kinds of electoral systems he has come across during his career.

As you may know, our mandate is to assess Ontario's electoral system, and others, and make a recommendation whether Ontario should retain its current system or adopt a different one. You might be asking, why do we need to look at our electoral system? And how do we get there?

We at the Assembly are starting this learning process from the ground up. We need to look at how well our system works and why our voter turnout is declining. We also need to see how the number of votes a party receives is reflected in the number of seats received. One Sunday earlier this month, our lessons began in earnest. It started with a simulated voting session. We were given three different ballots and were told to vote for our favourites.

The first ballot asked that we only vote for one of the choices - the choices being red grapes, carrot sticks, oatmeal cookies, smarties or potato chips. In this vote oatmeal cookies won with 28.5 per cent.

The second-place candidate was red grapes, with 27.6 per cent of the vote. With this method of voting, 71.5 per cent did not vote for the winner. This is the way we now vote, meaning that the person (in our case, snack) with the most votes wins the seat.

On the second ballot we were asked to rank the candidates in order of preference, a system called ordinal voting. In this vote red grapes won the election with 54.2 per cent of the votes after three candidates were eliminated. Oatmeal cookies placed second with 45 per cent of the vote.

The third ballot asked that we vote for the party. The Fruit Party won 34.7 per cent of the vote; Cookie Party 22.6 per cent, Veggie Party 22.5 per cent, Candy Party 12.9 per cent, and the Chip Party won 7.3 per cent.

In this scenario the Legislature (or in our case snacks) would be made of the above parties with the appropriate percentage of seats assigned to their party. This is called proportional voting. Who knew that oatmeal cookies could teach you about elections even if they're not from the chocolate-chip "party"?

This was a very simple exercise to demonstrate how different systems affect the outcome of a vote. After the collective "a-ha's!" were over, we began discussing what an electoral system is. Here in Ontario our Members of Provincial Parliament hold seats in the Legislature at Queen's Park. An electoral system establishes how these seats are filled when our votes are counted at election time.

Some components of an electoral system are: Riding/constituency size - here in Ontario our ridings have roughly the same population but are greatly varied in size. Structure of the ballot (as described above)

The formula for counting the vote (i.e.; most votes per riding, percentage of votes, most votes but must exceed 50 per cent of vote or a mix of any or all) The number of representatives in a riding (most countries have more than one representative per district/riding)

I will be back at "school" at the end of the month and will keep you informed as to my progress. You can also follow along at the website www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca

If you have any questions please e-mail me at ADroog@ontariocitizensassembly.ca For future reference there will be a public forum in Owen Sound tentatively set for later this year. I'll let you know the time and place when the details are finalized. I look forward to hearing your input.

Arita Droog is a member of the Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform and a member of the Sun Times community editorial board.

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