



**Electoral Reform in British Columbia:**  
*The Citizens' Assembly*

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## *Electoral Reform in British Columbia*

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- ❑ General perception of democratic deficit
- ❑ Wrong winner and lopsided majority in turn
- ❑ New reform Premier committed to act
- ❑ Radical approach to electoral reform
  - *a leap in the dark*



## *The BC Electoral Reform Story*

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- ❑ Ordinary citizens reviewed the province's electoral system
- ❑ Citizens' Assembly recommended abandoning current (*FPTP*) system for a very different way to conduct elections (*STV*) and count votes
- ❑ Reform recommendation went directly to referendum
- ❑ Recommendation won 58% support and passed in 77 of 79 districts in province-wide referendum
- ❑ Government has committed to 2<sup>nd</sup> Referendum



## *A Story with 4 Surprises*

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1. A Citizens' Assembly was held  
*politicians (the Premier) handed over significant power*
2. It worked – citizens figured it out  
*technicalities mastered & alternative agreed*
3. An unexpected proposal  
*an electoral system no-one expected*
4. The people's response  
*strong support but failed to meet a high hurdle*



# *The Citizens' Assembly*

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## □ *Mandate:*

- Analyze BC's Electoral & Parliamentary Politics
- Consider Alternative Electoral Systems
- Consult Widely
- Deliberate
- Recommend *status quo* or an alternative
- Submit recommendation to public in a referendum

## □ *Membership:*

- 160 individuals drawn at *random*
- Representative of BC's diverse population
- Participating as citizens, not representatives
- Few knew much about the subject of electoral systems

# *Citizens Assembling*





## *The Assembly's Work*

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- *A Year long 3 stage process*

- 1 Learning
- 2 Listening (*50 public hearings*)
- 3 Deliberating & Deciding

- *Engaged Citizens*

- ◆ Members invested time and effort
- ◆ Members transformed from passive voters to engaged citizens
- ◆ Discussions, debates and decisions rooted in agreed values
- ◆ Consensus sought for final decision

# *Intense Discussions*





## *Coming Towards a Decision*

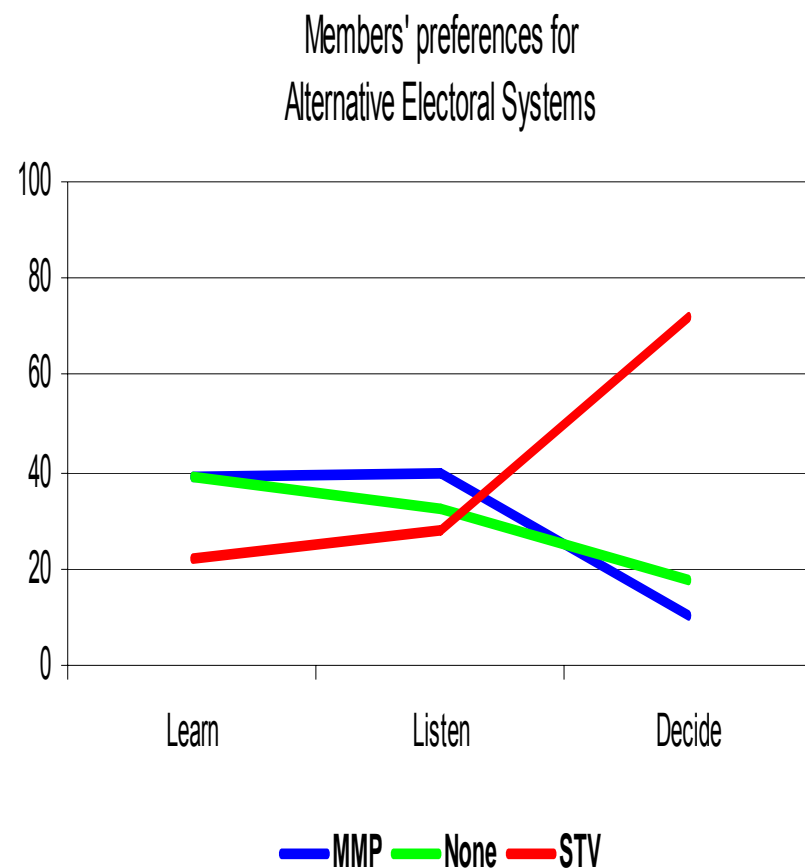
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- Decided to focus on 3 key features of electoral systems  
(*characteristics not consequences*)
  - **Voter Choice**
  - **Proportional Representation**
  - **Local Representation**
  
- Created 2 Alternative Systems that incorporated key features
  
- Discussion centred on trade-offs among them

Local Representation became focus of debate as it was the value least shared

## *Real Deliberation leads to Shifting Views*

- Dramatic changes over time as members learned about alternate systems but then also considered views of others
- Final result reflected desire to accommodate a minority of members' very strong concerns for local representation





## *The Assembly's Three Votes*

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- Which of the two alternatives would best serve BC?
  - MMP – 31
  - STV – 123
  
- Do we recommend retaining the current FPTP electoral system in BC?
  - Yes – 11
  - No – 142
  
- Do we recommend the BC-STV system to the people of BC in a referendum on May 17, 2005
  - Yes – 146
  - No – 7



## *Can a Citizens' Assembly Work?*

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- Can a representative group be assembled
- Can citizens acquire the required knowledge and expertise
- Can they be engaged enough to do the necessary work
- Can ordinary citizens balance:
  - public & private* interests
  - short and long-term* considerations
  - tangible & intangible* impacts
  - personal & collective* concerns

And then make decisions that require value trade-offs

***YES***



# *The Ingredients for Success*

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- ❑ Random selection of members
  - ↪ *provide legitimacy for individual members*
- ❑ Gender Balance
  - ↪ *create civil discourse & sense of representativeness*
- ❑ Important Task
  - ↪ *give members a raison d'être*
- ❑ Independence from Government
  - ↪ *provide public legitimacy for Assembly*
- ❑ Significant Power
  - ↪ *generate incentive to do the work*



## *Some Important Lessons*

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- ❑ Citizens want to contribute to making important decisions
- ❑ ‘Ordinary’ citizens can master complex materials
- ❑ Deliberative decision-making can work
- ❑ Diverse multi-cultural groups can make principled, value-based decisions
- ❑ Citizens will define problems, and solutions, differently than established elites



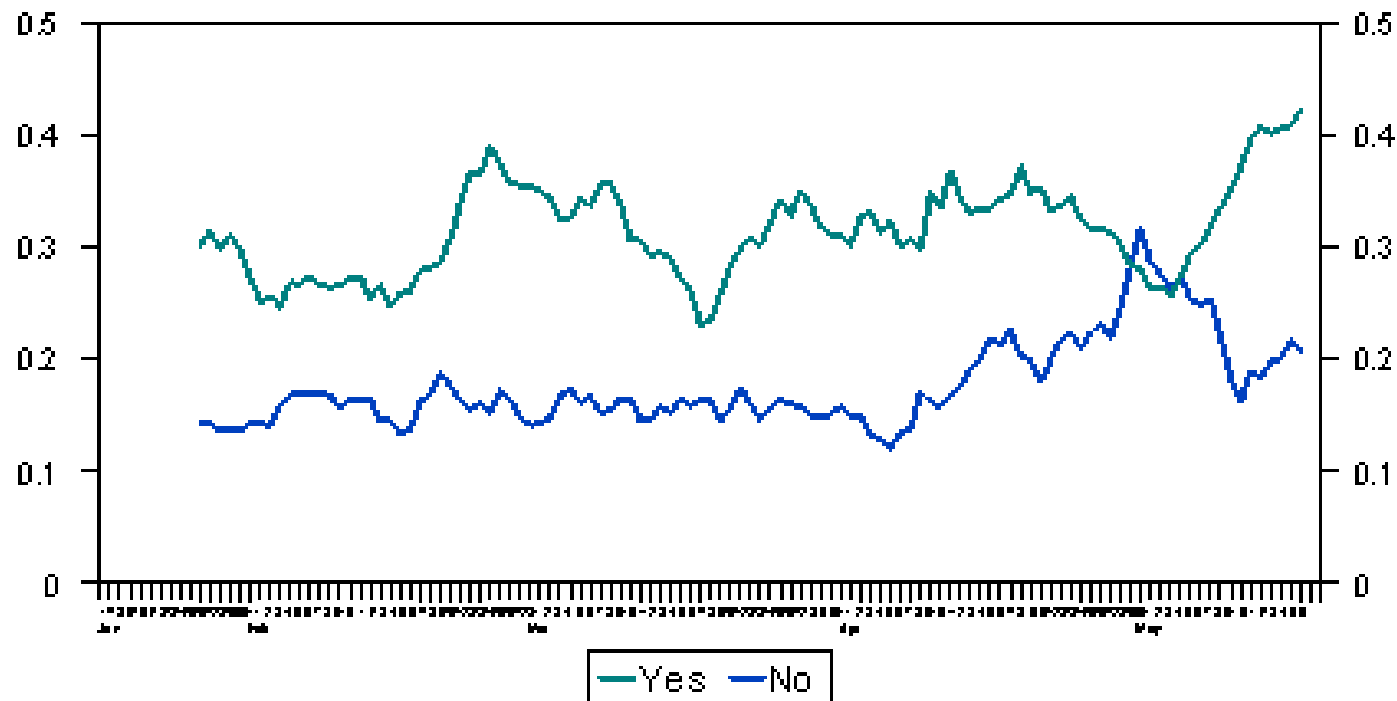
## *Approaching the Referendum*

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- Significant barriers to acceptance ( 60 / 60)
  - Almost no information or cues from government or political class
  - An invisible referendum campaign (55% awareness at E-day)
  
- BC Voters had figured out:
  - CA were ordinary British Columbians 5:1
  
- Voters shared views that would predispose a Yes vote:
  - Coalitions over 1-party governments 2:1
  - More choice over clear blame 6:1
  - Artificial majorities unacceptable 5:1
  - Not concerned about complexity 2:1

# *Voters Referendum Vote Intentions*

Referendum Vote Intentions by Day



Smoothed by 10-day prior moving average



# *On Referendum Day . . .*

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## **YES** voters were:

- 1. *Populists*** who found out  
minimally: that the CA was ordinary citizens  
maximally: that it was representative, open, and independent
- 2. *Non-populists*** who found out  
The assembly was independent, open, and became expert, &  
who preferred proportionality, preferential ballots, and weren't worried  
about gov't instability

## **NO** voters were:

- 1. *Populists*** who didn't know about the CA
- 2. *Non-populists*** who were majoritarians and had genuine concerns about  
government instability & accountability

*More information would have helped the Yes*



*... and next ... to May 2009 ...*

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- Premier announces support for reform merits a second referendum
- Public financial support for YES and NO campaigns to be provided
- BC Electoral Boundaries Commission to prepare a map for the alternate BC-STV electoral system
- Will the public remember the Citizens' Assembly and where the reform proposal came from ?