

# The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform





# ***A Citizens' Assembly for B.C.***

- A new idea  
in context of a government's general reform agenda
- Members participating as *citizens*, not *representatives*
- Clear, specific and limited mandate



# ***The BC Assembly's Mandate***

1. Analyze BC's Electoral & Parliamentary Politics
2. Consider Alternative Electoral Systems
3. Consult Widely
4. Deliberate
5. Recommend maintenance of *status quo* or an *alternative*
6. Submit their recommendation to decision by the public in a referendum



# ***British Columbians Respond***

- 160 individuals drawn *at random* from the voters' list  
*(politicians excluded)*
- Gender and age balanced;  
representative of the diverse population  
*(occupation, education, origin, ethnicity)*
- Few knew much about the subject of electoral systems



# *Meeting the Mandate's Challenge*

Learning

a new technical subject

Listening

hearing from the public

Deliberating

openness to others' arguments

Deciding

accepting the need to make trade-offs

No instructions (no problem to 'fix')  
threw members back on basic values

Assembly members embraced randomness as their  
continuing and fundamental organizational principle

# *Thinking about Electoral Systems*

- ↪ What sort of electoral system does BC need?
- ↪ What kind of politics do British Columbians want?
- ↪ What kind of British Columbia do its citizens want?
- ↪ What *shared* values should define the future?
- ↪ What values should govern its *collective* activity?

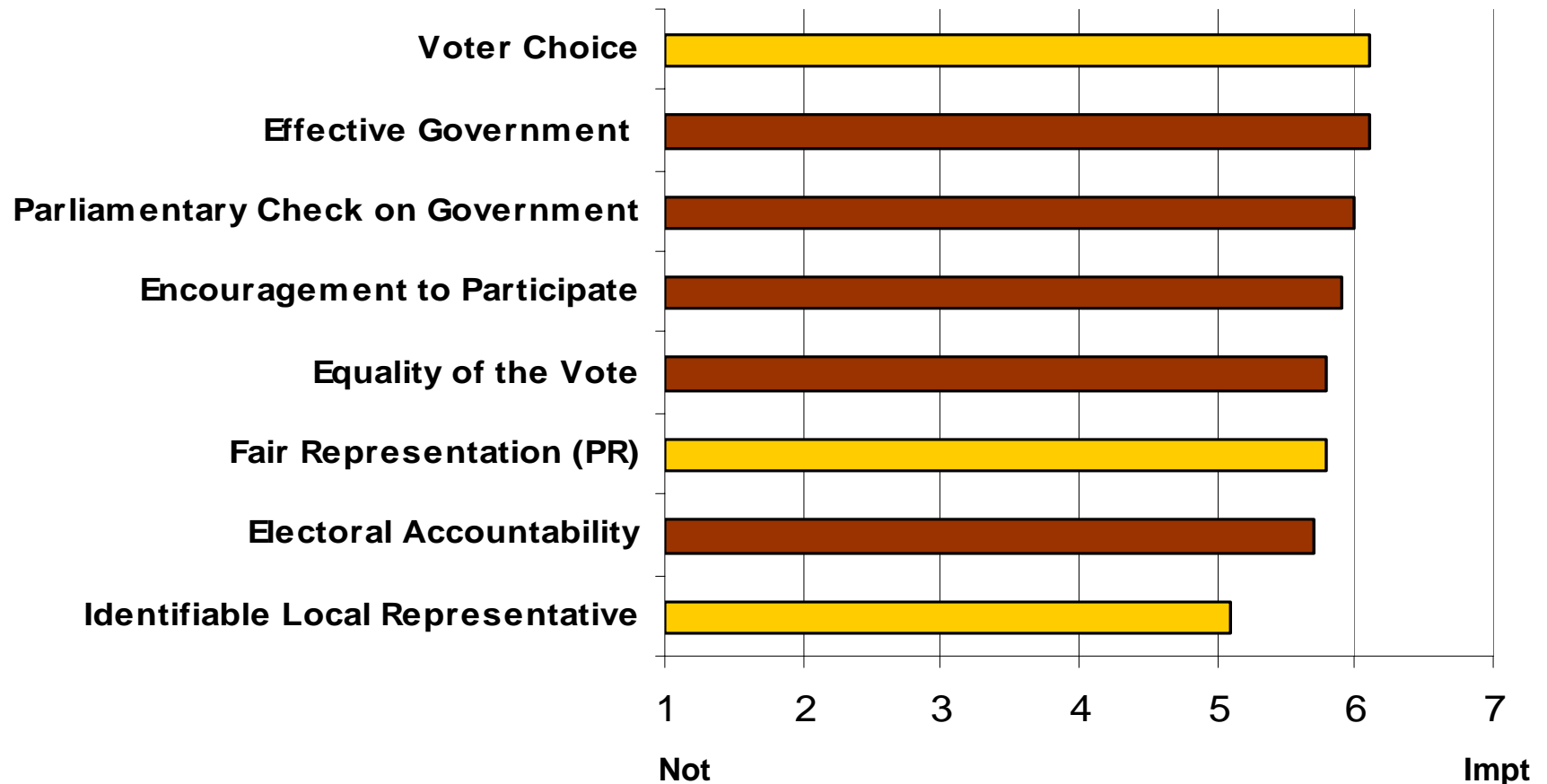
What electoral system might institutionalize those values?



# *Values that shape the decision*

- Little difference in relative importance of values associated with the working of electoral systems
- Members understood –
  - 1) Some valued features are:  
*definable **characteristics***, others are  
*probable **consequences***  
of electoral system operation
  - 2) Trade-offs would be necessary

# Assembly Members' Values



- Relatively little variation amongst them
- High levels of individual consistency over time
- Congruent with fellow citizens

# *Intense Discussions*



# Choosing Core Electoral System Values

- Small group discussions produced consensus on centrality of 3 key values to any alternative electoral system:

*voter choice*      *proportional representation*      *local representation*

- All 3 were definable features of an electoral system

voter choice	–	<i>ballot structure</i>
proportional representation	–	<i>electoral formula</i>
local representation	–	<i>district structure</i>

- Other important values effectively took second place in the members' minds as they worked to actually design a specific system for British Columbia



## ***Trading off Values in Decision-making***

- **Voter Choice, Proportional Representation** and **Local Representation** are competing values
- Members had to decide how to balance them when they individually gave different priorities to each
- They wanted to find a consensus acceptable to others  
*(and so the province)*  
rather than simply support the particular combination they personally favoured



## ***3 Values Structuring System Choice***

- **Voter choice was most valued**

consensus on it meant it was not the subject of much debate

### **Proportional Representation was critical**

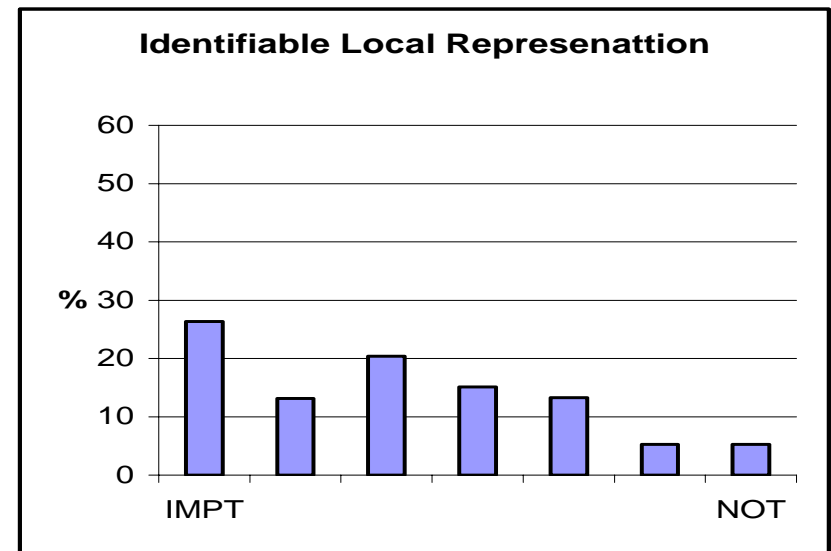
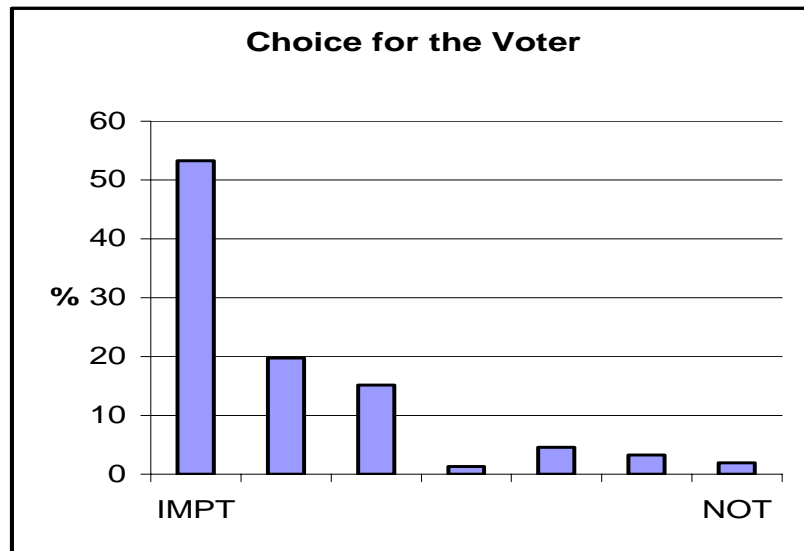
between alternatives with similar proportionality it was not decisive

- **Local representation**

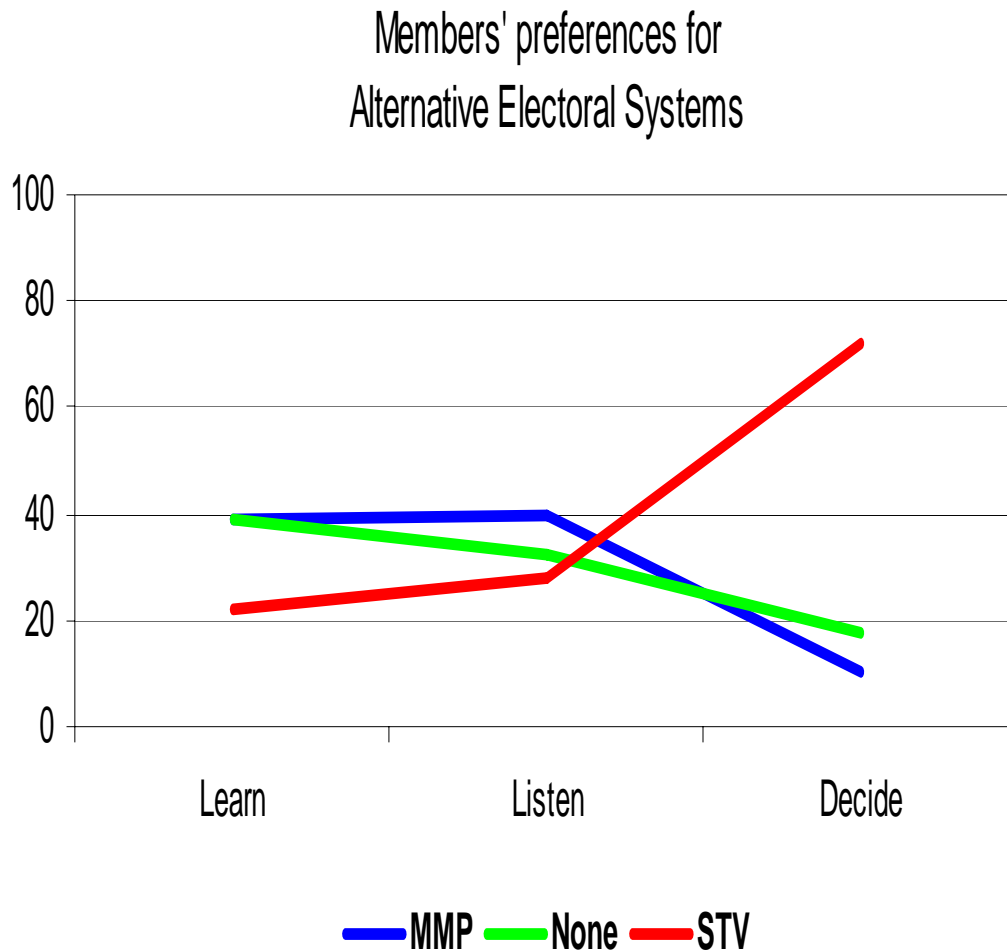
became critical precisely because there was least agreement on it

# The Final Debate

- Debate ultimately revolved around the importance of a value which was most unevenly distributed (i.e. *Local Representation*)
- This took time as members engaged in a long and complex conversation with each other



# *Deliberation ► Accommodation ► Shifting Electoral System Preferences*



- Dramatic changes over time as members learned about systems but then also considered views of others
- Compared 2 specific alternatives
- Final result reflects acceptance of need to accommodate a minority of members' concerns for local representation

# *One Member's Account at:*

## Randomocracy

A Citizen's Guide  
to Electoral Reform in British Columbia



Why the B.C. Citizens Assembly recommends  
the single transferable-vote system

Jack MacDonald

[www.bcelectoralreform.ca](http://www.bcelectoralreform.ca)

# *The Burgerforum*

- Dutch government constitutes a Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform
- Assembly deciding (Nov 10) and it appears they will opt for maintaining key features of the existing system
  - nationwide PR
  - no local electoral districts
- Members have given much thought to finding ways to constrain coalition-making

Likely outcome will be a recommendation to not substantially alter the current system.

[www.burgerforumkiesstelsel.nl](http://www.burgerforumkiesstelsel.nl)

