

Examining the Results of the Electoral Reform Referendum in Ontario

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The debate over democratic electoral reform has frequently been a centerpiece in democracies during the post war era, and this has resulted in the significant reform and transformation of many electoral systems, particularly in Europe. Other democracies, such as Canada, have resisted proposed electoral system changes. While there is an absence of discussion at the federal level, electoral reform has made its way onto several provincial public agendas. The most recent example, and the subject of this paper, is the rejection of the mixed-member proportional (MMP) election system by Ontario voters in the 2007 provincial election. Several other attempts at electoral reform have been made in Canadian provinces, most notably referendums in British Columbia and Prince Edward Island, and these referendums provide useful comparisons.

Despite a clear majority of Ontario voters rejecting the proposed electoral changes by a margin of 63.1% to 36.9%, there remains a level of ambiguity regarding the referendum results. One significant example of this ambiguity is the effect that information on MMP had on the likelihood of voters to accept the proposed electoral changes. While some studies indicate that information had an adverse effect on the proposed MMP electoral system (Gregg, Kelly, Sullivan & Woolstencroft, 2007), others have indicated that information and support for MMP were positively related (Cutler & Fournier, 2007). Perhaps more importantly, some studies indicate that as time progressed over the course of the referendum, the effect of information impacted different age groups in substantially different ways.

This paper explains these phenomena by comparing and contrasting the results of the differing studies on electoral reform. In addition, the paper provides an analysis of information in news sources during the election campaign and an analysis of data from Statistics Canada. The author seeks to expand the research on electoral reform in Ontario by investigating two theories:

first, the relationship between population diversity in electoral districts and the popularity of electoral reform, and second, the notion that undecided voters cast their ballots for the status quo.

Differing variables that may affect the success of electoral reform in Ontario are evaluated by their contribution to the model highlighted below. The high R-squared and t-statistics, together with the low RSS and correlate coefficients, suggest that much of the vote for MMP can be explained by these few variables.

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. regress MMP Immigrant Youth_18to24 Youth_25to28 Green_Vote
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Source	SS	df	MS	Number of obs = 106		
Model	.32534045	4	.081335113	F(4, 101)	=	75.99
Residual	.108109585	101	.001070392	Prob > F	=	0.0000
				R-squared	=	0.7506
				Adj R-squared	=	0.7407
Total	.433450035	105	.004128096	Root MSE	=	.03272

MMP	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Immigrant	.129082	.020783	6.21	0.000	.087854	.17031
Youth_18to24	-.3826999	.2703723	-1.42	0.160	-.9190457	.153646
Youth_25to28	2.361707	.2399547	9.84	0.000	1.885702	2.837713
Green_Vote	.004793	.0008832	5.43	0.000	.003041	.006545
_cons	.1881966	.0241465	7.79	0.000	.1402964	.2360968


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. correlate MMP Immigrant Youth_18to24 Youth_25to28 Green_Vote
(obs=106)
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	MMP	Immigr~t	Youth~24	Youth~28	Green~e
MMP	1.0000				
Immigrant	0.6124	1.0000			
Youth_18to24	0.2595	0.2883	1.0000		
Youth_25to28	0.7772	0.4998	0.3970	1.0000	
Green_Vote	0.2901	-0.1098	-0.0260	0.0874	1.0000

The Information Effect

Any question of voters' intentions and influences must examine the information voters used when making a judgment on electoral reform. While the McGuinty government intended Elections Ontario as the primary provider of information to voters, and despite a healthy budget of 6.8 million (Chung, 2007), the organization was soundly criticized for failing to educate Ontario voters about the referendum question and choices. Many commentators, both for and

against the proposed electoral reforms, noted that publically funded Yes and No campaigns would have benefitted the public debate (Urquhart, 2007; Fairvote).

Despite the lack of public education, and contrary to reports in major media outlets, Ontario voters felt that they were making an informed choice when voting on the referendum question (Cudworth, 2007; Howlett, 2007). In fact, a telephone surveys revealed that Ontario voters felt more knowledgeable about the electoral reform referendum than BC voters felt during the referendum on electoral reform in that province in 2005. A month prior to the respective referendum votes, 52% of BC residents felt they had knowledge about the proposed Single Transferable Vote (STV) system and 53% of Ontario residents felt they had knowledge about the proposed MMP system. Then, days prior to the respective referendum votes, 64% of BC residents felt knowledgeable while 75% of Ontario residents did (Strategic Counsel, 2007). This may not be a significant measure, however, as another referendum on electoral reform, evaluating the same STV system, is planned in BC due to a perceived lack of understanding as well as the slim margin of victory for the existing electoral system.

These studies lead to the question, if Ontario voters felt informed, and they were not informed by Elections Ontario, where were voters getting their information from, and how did these sources affect the outcome of the referendum?

One prominent source of information was the traditional media outlets, being newspapers, radio shows, and television programs. To analyze the affect of this media on the referendum, newspaper articles dealing with the referendum question were compiled from seventeen newspapers across Ontario. Comparing the tone of the articles with the voter results in the electoral districts in which each newspaper is printed provides insight into voter behaviour. The opinion articles were compiled from January 1 to October 10, 2007 and were graded with a

score of **1** if the article reflected a positive opinion of the proposed reforms, **0.5** if the article reflected a weak positive tone, **0** if the article was neutral, **-0.5** if the article reflected a weak negative tone, and **-1** if the article reflected a negative opinion. The averaged tone of the opinion articles and the average percentage of the vote the MMP system received in the ridings in which the newspaper is distributed are the two variables of interest.

Paper	Average MMP Result	Average Opinion Article
<i>The Brockville Recorder & Times</i>	29.00%	-0.03
<i>Chatham This Week</i>	30.70%	0.75
<i>Courier Press</i>	32.00%	0.40
<i>Daily Miner and News</i>	30.10%	-0.75
<i>Farm Market</i>	22.70%	0.25
<i>Guelph Mercury</i>	39.30%	0.05
<i>Hamilton Spectator</i>	36.14%	0.04
<i>London Free Press</i>	33.45%	-0.38
<i>Londoner</i>	37.93%	-1.00
<i>Ontario Farmer</i>	32.10%	1.00
<i>Ottawa Sun</i>	32.63%	0.09
<i>Simcoe Reformer</i>	35.35%	0.13
<i>Stratford Beacon Herald</i>	32.40%	0.25
<i>Times-Journal</i>	32.10%	-0.64
<i>Waterloo Region Record</i>	39.80%	0.17
<i>Timmins Times</i>	22.70%	-1.00
<i>Woodstock Sentinel-Review</i>	34.00%	0.17

This data presents some interesting findings regarding the MMP system and the print media. While the percentage of vote in favour of the MMP system in the riding covered by these newspapers is 32.49%, significantly lower than the provincial average (reflecting the exclusion of Toronto based papers as their distribution cannot be confined to certain ridings), the tone in the opinion articles was generally neutral, with an overall average of -0.03 for all newspapers. Using regression analysis, a B2 value of -0.0233 and a B1 value of 0.3242 are obtained. The result is

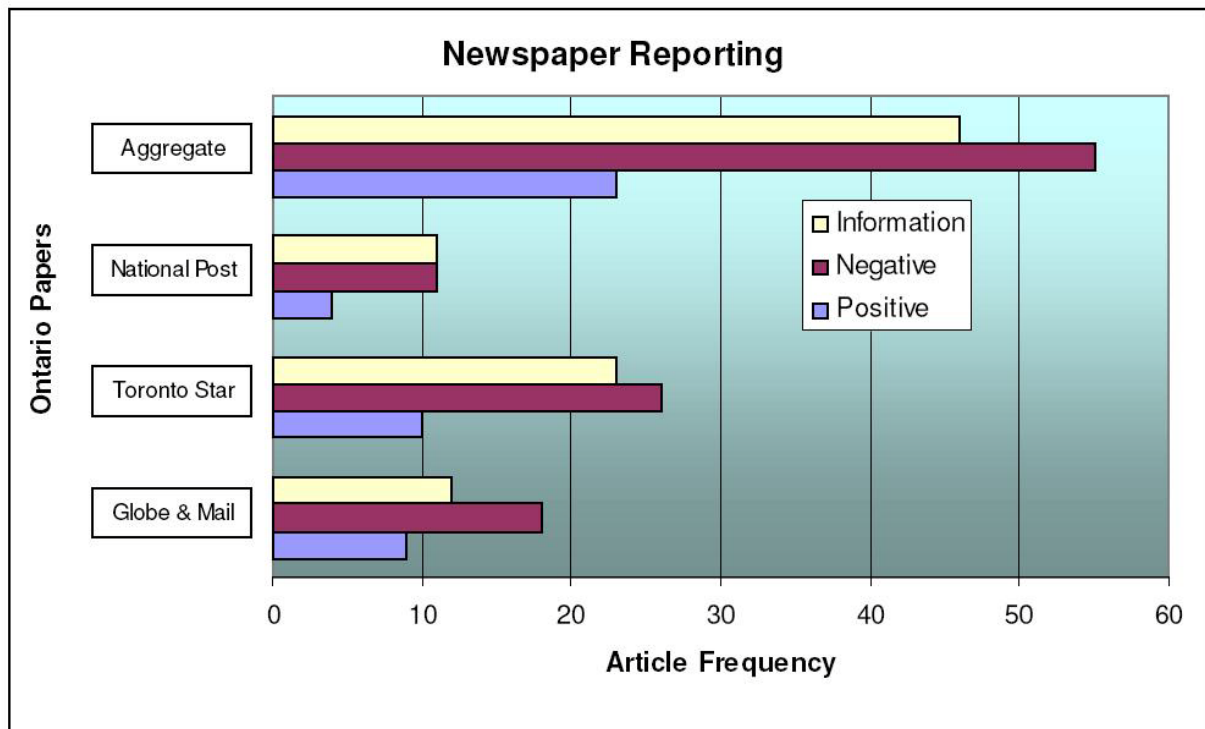
that if nearly all opinion pieces in newspapers across the province were in favour of the MMP system (a one unit change), the overall vote for MMP would only increase by 0.3242%. Similarly, if nearly all opinion pieces in the newspapers across the province were against the MMP system, the overall vote for MMP would only decrease by 0.3242%. Less than one percent of the referendum result can be explained by the opinion pieces in newspapers as the R^2 is 0.00157. These averaged statistics show a minimal role for print media editorials in explaining voter behaviour.

Beneath the aggregate statistics lies a different story, however. While both the Guelph Mercury and the Waterloo Region Record had an average tone of 0.05 and 0.17 respectively for opinion articles regarding the MMP system, the editorial boards of these papers came out with negative articles on the system. After two summer articles urging citizens to investigate the proposed electoral reforms, the Guelph Mercury's editorial board wrote an article denouncing electoral reform on October 9, titled *First-past-the-post is still welcome*. The editorial board of the Waterloo Region Record, followed the same approach, publishing two opinion pieces recommending an open debate on the proposed electoral reforms before concluding with *The wrong kind of electoral reform* on October 6.

These denouncements of MMP by the editorial boards of print media reflect articles in major papers that can be characterized as leading the debate. Looking specifically at the three major papers in Ontario, and excluding letters to the editor which "are considered to be in response to the debate, but not framing or leading it", LeDuc, Bastedo, and Baquero conclude that "when the press did choose to write on the Assembly process, the

electoral reform recommendation, or the referendum, its tone was overwhelmingly negative.” It is thus not surprising that the editorial boards of the National Post, Toronto Star, and the Globe & Mail were aligned in opposition.

Figure 1: Content analysis of articles in three major newspapers



Yet, print media is not the only source of information and influence for voters in Ontario. Across the province, professors and university students were very involved in the electoral reform debate and took up advocacy roles. Two major news items that may have influenced some voters was the announcement that 145 university professors of politics and law across Ontario endorsed MMP and another announcement that 17 university student unions also endorsed the proposed electoral reforms (yestommp.ca/archives). The result of these announcements can be seen in the province wide mock election of high school students (a population which is often influenced by events on university campuses), which was split between

MMP and FPTP by a 45/55 percent margin. This result shows a much greater support for MMP among high school students than the general population. Additionally, regressing explanatory variables against the MMP result shows that the percentage of citizens aged 25-29 in a riding is a very significant indicator in predicting support for MMP, with an r-squared of 0.6 and a t-statistic of 12.6 using a simple variable regression. Finally, looking specifically at polls held for university campuses in Ontario there is a clear distinction comparing the results of these polls and those polls held for the general population. Data for the 26 universities across the province shows that polls held for university campuses averaged 53.6% in favour of MMP, over 16% higher than the general population, and over 12% higher for the population in these electoral districts.

That said, it is important to note that even in June, 2007, young voters were the most favourable demographic for the proposed electoral reform, with 43 percent opting for the new system. This suggests that there is something more supporting youth support for MMP than the official endorsements from youth-orientated organizations and professionals. One explanation is that the political parties most supported by youth (the NDP and Green Parties) would benefit most from the proposed reforms. Indeed, supporters of the NDP and Green Party were more likely, when polled, to respond in favour of MMP (Strategic Counsel, 2007; Stephenson and Tanguay, 2008). Although regression results provide a slightly different interpretation of the relationship between party support and support for the proposed electoral reforms. While MMP was often advertised by its supports as a way of ensuring legislative power to those minority parties and voters that are often shut out of the formal political process, the referendum results do not back this notion entirely. Regression results indicate that large numbers of citizens backing candidates with little chance of being elected is not a significant predictor of how MMP would

fare. Furthermore, measuring the number of citizens in an electoral district supporting political parties that have very little chance of gaining significant political power (less than 20% of the overall vote) yields a very insignificant explanatory variable.

While some variables are very significant at the bivariate level, much of this is reduced using the multivariate regression model, leaving the percentage vote that the Green Party received in each electoral district as the most significant explanatory variable. This indicates that Ontario residents voted more based on party ideology than on giving those without political power a chance at legislative power. This finding confirms surveys conducted in British Columbia that found that support for STV was higher among Green Party supporters (60%) than among any other party or specific geographic location. As such, only the percentage of Green votes in each district will be included in the final regression model for the MMP vote.

Additional explanations should not be written off, however, as different age groups responded differently throughout the campaign period as more information and perspectives became available. Interestingly, throughout the course of the referendum, and as more information became available and well known, voters turned against the MMP system. While many predicted that the referendum would fail if information did not reach all citizens, it appears that the referendum failed *because* information was dispersed. Combining results from an Environics poll conducted from June 5-13, and two polls conducted by the Strategic Counsel conducted from September 13-16 and October 6-7 provides a small timeline of data to work with. Starting in June, 28% of those contacted indicated that they were knowledgeable about the proposed MMP system, rising to 53% in the September survey and finally 75% in October, days before the referendum vote. Among the respondents that indicated they had either a little or a lot of knowledge about the proposed MMP system, 55% supported the new system when asked in

June, which then fell to 41% in September and then 37% in October, approximately the level of support the referendum question received. These results suggest that as the details of the proposed system became known, voters began to reject the MMP system.

This finding goes against much of the analysis done by researchers such as Cutler and Fournier. These authors simulated a referendum outcome in Ontario if:

all citizens had known: (1) that MMP would give voters two votes, elect some members whose names never appear on a ballot, produce proportional outcomes with more parties and infrequent majorities; and (2) that assembly members "were ordinary Ontarians," "had an equal chance of being chosen," "represented all parts of Ontario," "became experts on electoral systems," and that "most members wanted what's best for all Ontarians" (rather than themselves).

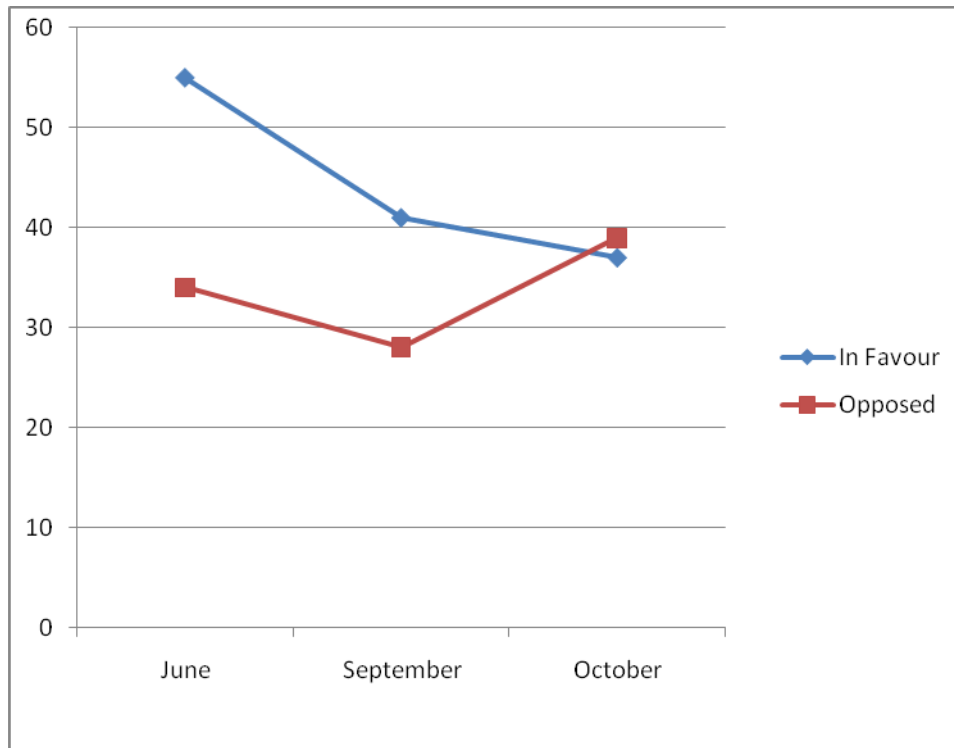
The authors find that under the above conditions there would have been 63 per cent for MMP and 37 per cent for the existing system, the exact opposite results of the referendum (Cutler and Fournier, 2007). These conditions neglect full information on the liabilities of the MMP system, however. There is certainly good reason to suspect that the certain details of the MMP system may turn voters away from supporting the system. Post-election survey results indicate that a majority of Ontario citizens do not trust government (67%), that government wastes taxpayer money (93%), and that government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves (54%). On the level of politicians themselves, a majority of Ontario citizens state that the government does not care what they think (59%), and that elected officials soon lose touch with the electorate (74%). As a stark contrast, 74% of Ontario citizens are satisfied with the way democracy works in Ontario (Tanguay and Stephenson, 2007). These seemingly conflicting results suggest that respondents are satisfied with the democratic practices in place, but are unsatisfied with the politicians and government that result from the process. Perhaps even more significant is the finding that those who were disillusioned with the existing electoral system did

not see the chance to vote in the referendum as a way to address their disappointments. This is reflected in many of the editorials that came out against MMP, that the system would in fact give more power to politicians through candidate selections and raise the number of MPPs in Ontario from 107 to 129 (London Free Press, 2007).

Yet the way the proposed electoral reform was framed left a large part of the issue unjustifiably absent, the role of the Citizens' Assembly. Since survey data revealed that voters tend to be skeptical of politicians, the assembly might have provided much-needed grassroots legitimacy, as the assembly's members were ordinary people. This unpublicized fact could have helped in overcoming the fact that the "formal and abstract nature of reform proposals" is often removed from citizens that are distrustful of a "remote provincial government" (Johnston, Krahn and Harrison, 2006). At the beginning of the referendum campaign, half of Ontario voters said that they knew nothing about the assembly and, surprisingly, the number made no gain over the campaign period.

Post election analysis has revealed that certain arguments from both sides of the electoral reform campaign were much more convincing to voters. The argument against MMP that resonated were the simplest ones, there is a lack of information about the proposed system, that the Legislature would increase in size, and that lists would be controlled by "party bosses." There was some receptivity to components of MMP, including the need for greater fairness in elections, proportionality, and the opportunity for a "second vote" (LeDuc, Bastedo, and Baquero, 2008). However, the simple arguments against MMP seemed to resonate as Ontario voters felt both knowledgeable about the proposed system, and dislike for it.

Support for MMP in Ontario among Knowledgeable Voters



There is one interesting “counter” to the inverse relationship between information and voter opinion, and that is support for MMP among young voters, classified as those 18-34. The data available from the Strategic Counsel indicates that between polls in September and October decided youth voters increased their support for MMP from 60% to 67% while those aged 35-49 reduced their support from 59% to 50% and those aged 50 and above reduced their support from 46% to 33%.

Another counter trend is the finding from the British Columbia referendum on the proposed STV reform indicated that support for the reforms increased with knowledge of the system (Ipsos, 2005). However, this is likely because of details relating to the MMP system that received much public scrutiny and were not present in the STV system.

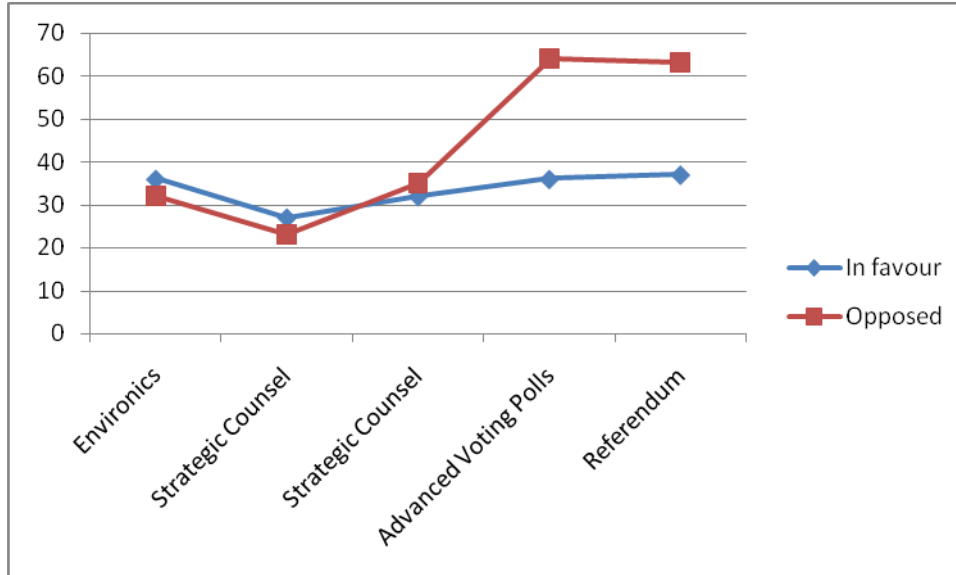
Uncertainty and the Status Quo

The fact that the MMP system finished with approximately the level of support indicated by the telephone poll taken just before the vote is significant in and of itself. According to this poll, taken five just days before the referendum, 33% of voters had still not committed as either in favour or against of MMP. This may indicate that almost this entire group of voters decided in the last moments of the campaign to oppose the new system. There are two possible explanations: either voters received enough information in the remaining days of the campaign to turn them away from the proposed system, or voters decided that changing the electoral system in Ontario would be too risky and not worth a gamble. While the late flurry of newspaper editorial boards advocating keeping the FPTP system may give weight to the first explanation, much has been made of the conservative political culture in Ontario and the impact this would have on voters to steer away from any proposed reforms. Public surveys indicate that unlike countries like New Zealand, where MMP was adopted by referendum and whose citizens felt a general anger towards the electoral system and the unrepresentative governments it produces, there was no such discontent in Ontario (LeDuc, Bastedo and Baquero, 2008). Thus, for referendum campaigns, particularly those dealing with unfamiliar issues, the political advantage often seems to rest with those opposed to reform. LeDuc notes that:

[t]hose opposed to a proposal do not necessarily have to make a coherent case against it. Often, it is enough merely to raise doubts about it in the minds of voters, question the motives of its advocates, or play upon a natural fear of the unknown (2007).

This characteristic of Ontario voters is quite evident in finding that come time to vote, almost the entire group of undecided voters rejected the proposed MMP system.

Support for MMP in Ontario over Time

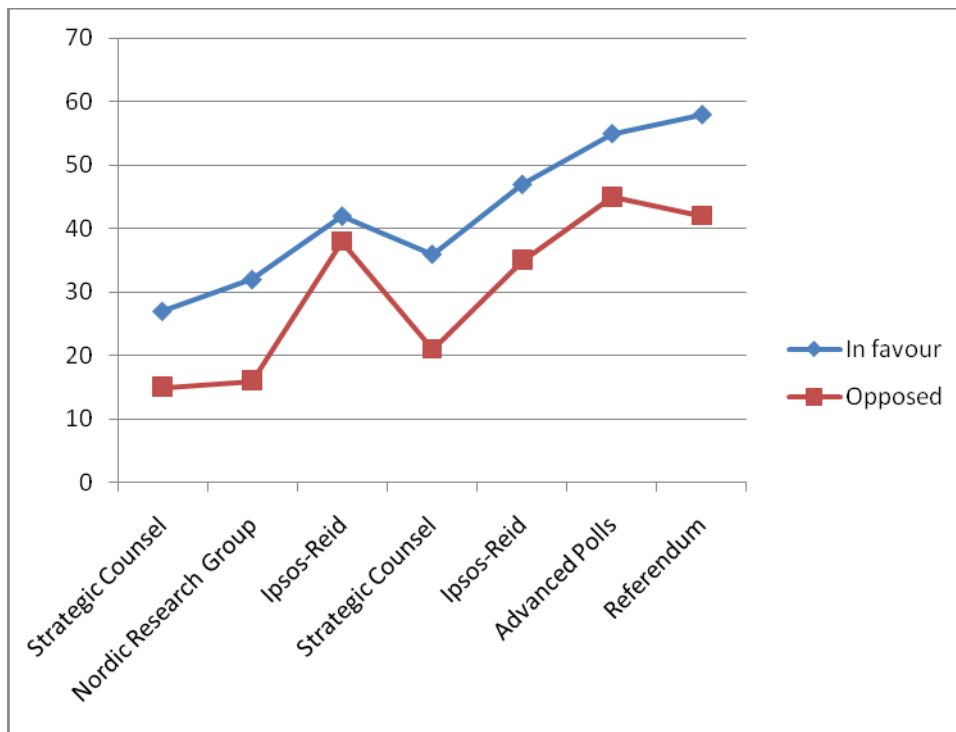


Much like Ontario, the political culture of Prince Edward Island can be described as having a conservative nature. Citizens have strong partisanship and close relationships with their representatives so that "changing one's party politics was akin to treachery or betrayal, an act of dishonour almost like changing one's religion (MacKay, 128)." Since there is a representative for every 5000 PEI voters (Cousins, 2000), constituents generally work to maintain these strong relationships, which some might fear MMP would put in jeopardy. It is also worth noting that the population is fairly homogeneous (MacDonald, 135) and weak support for third alternative parties, traits that will later be shown to be against the proposed reforms in Ontario. When the idea of proportional representation has been brought up in the past, it has been soundly rejected by the government, when the Election Act and Electoral Boundaries Commission noted that it would be too drastic a change and "its implementation in this jurisdiction would not be appropriate at this time (Political Landscape, 20)," the media, when *The Guardian* commented after the lopsided 1993 election that "daydreams of a system that more accurately reflects the

wishes of all voters" were "unworkable" (1993) and finally by the citizens of PEI through a referendum on MMP in 2005. This referendum defeat was a sound result, despite the fact that observers felt if any electoral change was possible, the MMP system would have the greatest chance (Cousins, 2000).

Ontario and PEI can be contrasted with BC, a province that commentators had long noted "itched" for any kind of electoral reform. Much of the campaign literature from groups advocating STV exploited this fact, and their advertisements focused on framing the referendum as the only chance for electoral change. The result is the exact opposite effect as in Ontario, as undecided voters backed STV on Election Day and shied away from the current FPTP system.

Support for BC-STV over Time



Ontario's conservative political culture can be seen as undemocratic as it opposes change not based on information, but on fear. Several recommendations have been made to ensure that voters base their decision on their intellectual decision making rather than on political culture.

One major focus of concern is the wording of the referendum question. On June 20, 2007, the wording of the referendum question was released by the Democratic Renewal Secretariat.

Which electoral system should Ontario use to elect members to the provincial legislature?/Quel système électoral l'Ontario devrait-il utiliser pour élire les députés provinciaux à l'Assemblée législative?

The existing electoral system (First-Past-the-Post)/L'actuel système électoral (système de la majorité relative)

The alternative electoral system proposed by the Citizens' Assembly (Mixed Member Proportional)/L'autre système électoral proposé par l'Assemblée des citoyens (système de représentation proportionnelle mixte) (Ontario, Democratic Renewal Secretariat 2007).

Besides criticisms of the 60% supermajority required, a level of support not even present in MMP using New Zealand, some questioned the specific wording of the question, pointing out that “[a]nything that is labeled "alternative" will likely be voted against by conservatives (Setnyk, 2007).” Fair Vote Canada, the most active group supporting the campaign for MMP, stated that there was unnecessary confusion with this wording, and that a simple yes/no question would have been clearer. The BC referendum had put the referendum question in the suggested form:

Should British Columbia change to the BC-STV electoral system as recommended by the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform? Yes/No

Although the BC wording approach had been criticized by some citizens against the proposed reforms, stating that “[t]urning the question into a confidence vote on the Citizen's Assembly is not fair (Schreck, 2005).” Regardless, later in 2005 when Prince Edward Island had its referendum on electoral reform, the wording used followed the BC approach.

Should Prince Edward Island change to the Mixed Member Proportional System as presented by the Commission of PEI's Electoral Future?

One approach to electoral reform referendums that has not received attention is using a voting system similar to the recall system, whereby two questions are asked, the first if a recall is needed, the second, a list of candidates, which is only necessary if a sufficient number of voters indicate that a recall is in order. Similarly, two questions could have been asked of Ontario voters: the first if electoral reform is needed, and the second a list of options as the Citizens' Assembly sees fit. As it stands, Ontario voters have rejected one electoral system of many, and that leaves the governing bodies with a great deal of ambiguity and room to interpret the results.

Population Diversity and Support for MMP

In a multicultural society like Canada, much interest is given to the effect that minority populations play in the political process. This effect was controversially noted in a concession speech given by Jacques Parizeau, the Parti Quebecois Premier after narrowly losing 50.58% to 49.42% in the 1995 Quebec referendum on sovereignty. In his speech Parizeau blamed “money and some ethnic votes” for the referendum loss (CBC archives). Similar to Quebec, Ontario has a great variety in minority populations across electoral districts, and it may be that the voting behaviour of these groups had an effect on the MMP results. Using regression analysis it appears that indeed, there is a significant relation between a diverse population and the referendum results. Two variables of greatest significance are the percentage of recent immigrants in an electoral district and the percentage of people in an electoral district with a mother language other than English.

regress MMP Visible_Minority Immigrant Mother_Language Home_Language

Source | SS df MS Number of obs = 106

-----+-----				F(4, 101) =	17.64	
Model		.178250858	4	.044562714	Prob > F = 0.0000	
Residual		.255199177	101	.002526725	R-squared = 0.4112	
-----+-----				Adj R-squared =	0.3879	
Total		.433450035	105	.004128096	Root MSE = .05027	

MMP		Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]
-----+-----						
Visible_Mi~y		-.1184419	.0760826	-1.56	0.123	-.2693694 .0324855
Immigrant		.4076071	.0913128	4.46	0.000	.2264671 .5887472
Mother_Lan~e		-.1140525	.0851907	-1.34	0.184	-.2830479 .0549429
Home_Langu~e		.0559213	.1267219	0.44	0.660	-.1954609 .3073034
_cons		.3091328	.0131159	23.57	0.000	.2831144 .3351513

Interestingly, these two variables affect the results in opposite directions, with recent immigrants having a positive relationship with the respect to the MMP vote and an alternative mother language having a negative relationship with respect to the MMP vote. This confusing result may be explained by the large number of French-Canadians living in electoral districts that voted largely against the proposed reforms. Regardless, there is a high level of correlation between these two variables (a correlation coefficient of 0.8253) as well as other diversity indicators such as the percentage of the population being visible minorities in an electoral district and the percentage of the population with a home language other than English in an electoral district. Of these indicators, the percentage of recent immigrants in an electoral district is the most significant indicator, and thus will be the only diversity indicator used in a MMP referendum model. Not surprisingly, there is also a great deal of correlation between the percentage of recent immigrants in an electoral district and the population density in that electoral district (a correlation coefficient of 0.659). This finding reflects the fact that most

immigrants in Canada settle in dense urban areas. That said, population density is not a significant variable, indicating that the noticeable trend of urban areas voting for the proposed changes much more than rural areas is due to the numbers of recent immigrants in these areas, not for reasons of population size or density. This result may indicate that the referendum campaign in the future may want to alter their target from urban areas, to those with a high number of recent immigrants, areas that appear to be more receptive to the message of electoral reform.

Moving Forward

These findings hint at the immense task for proponents of electoral reform. Two key lessons are that the devil is in the details, and that in Ontario (though not everywhere), undecided voters are likely to vote against change. Yet all hope for reformists is not lost. The model presented in this paper indicates that there is a very strong explanatory power in a couple variables, notably the percentage of the population in a riding that are recent immigrants, aged 25-29, or who vote for the Green Party. Proponents of electoral reform would be wise to overview the characteristics of electoral districts and concentrate their efforts accordingly. Additionally, proponents should realize the strong opposition from major media outlets and the ineffectiveness of letters to the editor and pursue a more formal awareness campaign.

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