British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform
1st Weekend : Session 3 (Sunday morning)

Assessing Electoral Systems

To choose among electoral systems involves deciding what sort of politics we want and then trying to determine what kind of electoral system will give it to us. This is not a perfect process with a formula that allows us to say we want this kind of politics so we need that kind of politics. This is because the very same system will often work differently, and produce different kinds of results, in different places. But it is also because if we choose a system that will satisfy one of our preferences it may work against satisfying another.

In our first session we talked about some of the aspects of politics that are important to us as citizens and voters. In this session we want to identify some of the criteria normally used to grade electoral systems and decide which of them we will be applying to individual systems when we come to look at them in detail. There is any number of criteria for assessing electoral systems but it is important that we identify the features that we think are relevant so that when we come to look at the families of electoral systems in some detail we can judge them by all the same criteria.

In Farrell's textbook (in chapter 7) you will see he talks about

- direct effects – proportionality, the number of parties & representation of women
- systemic effects – the consequences of how proportional the systems is
- strategic effects – how voters use different systems to signal their preferences
- party effects – how parties operate under different systems

We will see how many of these effects work if we consider the impact of electoral systems on different elements of the political system. In particular, we can identify several different ways that we believe that electoral arrangement can have an impact:

A *On the system of government:*
- stable and effective government
- electoral accountability
- parliamentary check on government
- fair representation for parties and groups
- democratic political parties

B *For voters:*
- sufficient (maximum?) choice
- identifiable representative
- encouragement to participate
- equality of the vote

A1.   STABLE AND EFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT

The argument for a *stable government* seems obvious. It is desirable to have a government that:

- is able to take hard decisions when necessary
- is able to move quickly if necessary
- can count on being in office long enough to plan and implement its policies
- does not need to constantly bargain with other groups for survival
- is not likely to be defeated on the whim of a few minority party politicians

In situations with *government instability* you can get a cycle of uncertainty and confusion in which:

- governments don't survive long are often defeated by the arbitrary action of parliamentarians from parties that never have to take any governing responsibility
- indecisive elections are held (too) frequently
- governments don't want to make hard decisions that might threaten their existence
- developing coherent public policy is very difficult

Government stability can sometimes be misleading. I am sure that we have all heard about the constant change of government in Italy where for half a century following the second world war governments lasted less than one year before being defeated, or that Japan has had over thirty different prime ministers during that same period (more than Canada in its entire history!). In fact many of those changes were really just like cabinet shuffles in Canada. That said, every time you change a prime minister / premier and his or her government there is a good deal of uncertainty in the government involved.

The dark side of these arguments that trumpet the importance of stability is the reality that such governments can be:

- arrogant and insensitive to public opinion
- unwilling to compromise
- too easily dominated by 'dictatorial' leaders

Electoral systems can make a difference to government stability but generally only by reflecting, or exaggerating, an instability or set of deep divisions that exists within the population.

An electoral system issue for us is: *How important is the trade-off between government stability (which often really means majority government or the status quo) and an accurate replication of society's social and political divisions in the legislature?*

A2.   ELECTORAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Elections allow us to choose representatives – they are also about *choosing governments*. In order to make elections about a choice of governments it is necessary that:

- voters can identify which parties were responsible for government decisions in the past
- political parties and candidates clearly signal their intentions with respect to possible future coalition partners

In British Columbia, with our kind of electoral system it is clear who is responsible for government decisions, who the alternative is, and what you need to do at election day if you want to either support the current government or get rid of it. We all saw how that worked in the last election.

Electoral systems that produce parliaments with no obvious or predictable majority can produce a situation in which:

- governments are produced by bargains between politicians after the election
- parties may have to compromise the principles that won them votes in order to form a coalition
- coalitions may not be those expected by the voters as electoral opponents come together
- government coalitions can take weeks or months to establish
- voters may have difficulty knowing which coalition party partner to credit or blame for government decisions at the next election

The electoral system may facilitate electoral accountability but the activities of political parties, how clear they are on their intentions, and how rigorously the keep their electoral pledges is at least as important.
Accountability is clearest when single-party governments are created. Electoral systems that contribute to that obviously make government accountability straightforward.

The other aspect of accountability is how much *personal accountability* there is for individual representatives.
Under our system in BC MLAS are directly accountable to their local voters. On election day one can vote to either elect or defeat individual candidates.

Electoral systems that are based on party not candidate voting may not provide for this kind of accountability as the voters do not always have the opportunity to pass electoral judgment on individual politicians.

So we need to ask: *What kind of accountability does a particular electoral system provide? How does it do so?*

A3.   PARLIAMENTARY CHECK ON GOVERNMENTS

One of the key tasks of a legislature is to scrutinize the work of governments.
The ability of a legislature to do this will depend largely on the rules and procedures it adopts, and the degree and kind of discipline that exists within the political parties.

We do know that our legislatures in Canada are quite bad at this: governments easily get their way. Indeed it is what Prime Minister Martin has called our great democratic deficit. He hopes to fix it by loosening the bonds of party discipline.

Party discipline is partly shaped by the electoral system. Some systems enhance the power of party leaders or bureaucrats over individual politicians and they obviously strengthen discipline; other systems tie individual politicians' electoral success directly to the voters and those systems offer the possibility of some greater independence by politicians.

Electoral systems that do not give governments artificial majorities – that is a majority of seats without a majority of votes – strengthen the hand of the legislature by making the government dependent on it for its continuing existence.
In these situations the legislature has an opportunity to review government activity and to force it to respond to its will.

Effective parliamentary checks on government are likely to be found in multi-party legislatures where the government doesn't command an easy majority. But are those the situations that are least likely to promote stable, accountable government? Is it possible for an electoral system to contribute to balancing the two?

A4.   FAIR REPRESENTATION FOR PARTIES AND GROUPS

This is one of the biggest items that always appears in any assessment of an electoral system – how fair is it? There are several aspects to this issue:

- do all votes count equally
- are some votes wasted
- does the share of seats a political party wins reflect its share of votes
- will all groups in the population be represented

Equal votes – It seems intuitive that votes should count equally in a democracy but in
     electoral systems that use constituency systems that requires some arrangement to
     ensure that the constituencies have equal numbers of voters in them.
     In the last BC election 9,054 people voted in Peace River North and 27,645 voted
     in Comox Valley. It appears that a vote in Peace River North was worth 3 times
     that of one in the Comox Valley riding.
     *We should ask does an electoral system provide for equal voting power for all
     citizens, and how does it do so?*

Wasted Votes – This is a controversial term that refers to votes that do not contribute to someone's election. Some think that if an MLA gets elected with 40% of the vote then the votes of the other 60% of the people who voted for someone else are somehow 'wasted'.

In the last election 197,231 British Columbians voted for a Green Party candidate but they were never the largest group in any constituency and so no Green candidate got elected. Did those people waste their vote or did they simply lose? It is possible to increase the proportion of voters who contribute to electing someone – by going to a proportional system or by counting the second preferences of voters whose favourite candidate couldn't win.

Are wasted votes really an issue we need to take into consideration?

Proportionality – A big criticism of some electoral systems is that they try to produce a single winner rather than reflecting the distribution of preferences among the voters. We saw this rather dramatically in the last BC election. Then the Liberals got 58% of the votes but won 77 of the 79 (97%) the seats in the legislature. The NDP got 22% of the vote and 2 (3%) of the seats; the Greens 12% of the vote but no seats.

It is possible to have an electoral system that is much closer to proportionality – for instance in Holland a party can win a set with less than 1% of the vote – but you can't have such a system if all MLAs are elected as the only representative of an electoral district. So, more proportionality would mean giving up our system of exclusive single-member constituencies.

The last BC election was an exception because, unless there are only two parties, it is rare for one party to win a majority of the vote. That means moving to proportionality (called Proportional Representation) probably involves moving to a system of multi-party coalition government.

How important is proportionality, and how much proportionality is desirable?
These are big and important questions in choosing an electoral system.

Representation of Excluded Groups – Politics in most democratic systems has traditionally been dominated by over-educated, middle-aged, middle class males from the dominant cultural community. Is this what we want in a multi-cultural community like British Columbia? For the most part the political parties are responsible for recruiting candidates that reflect the wider community and it is in their interest to do so if they want to attract as many votes as possible. There is now a good deal of evidence from other countries to suggest that some electoral systems are better a producing a more diverse legislature than others.

The best know example concerns the representation of women (or one should say the under-representation of women) in parliaments. It appears that women are more likely to be elected in some kinds of systems than others. Whether this is because of some direct effect or because it provides for different kinds of party nomination practices is uncertain. The point is that electoral systems do seem to make a difference.

Are there groups in BC that do not get elected to the legislature? Should this be a consideration in evaluating possible changes to the electoral system?

A5.   DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL PARTIES

We are going to talk about political parties in some detail next time, especially why we have or need them. Public attitudes towards them are mixed with many agreeing that:

- parties are part of the problem – party discipline gets between what voters want and what their representatives do in the legislature
- without political parties you can't have a true democracy

There are no working democracies that do not have effective political parties to recruit candidates, offer a co-ordinated set of alternatives to the voters and to provide An instrument which can give a collective dimension to individual voting acts. When voters in districts as separate as the Bulkley Valley and Vancouver Point Grey vote for (or against) candidates of the same party they are participating in a collective event in a way that they wouldn't if all candidates were simply local independents.

Electoral systems can shape parties in different ways, for example:

- they have an impact on how their structure and internal power relations by determining how candidates are selected
- they can facilitate the proliferation of a number of varied parties or they can reward those that combine together in 'catch-all' vote machines
- they structure the nature of the competitive relations among them

Given the central position parties have in electoral competition, their basic features have a direct impact on the nature of a community's politics. This means *an important aspect of assessing an electoral system is how it affects the number and nature of the parties. How does it influence the competitive relationships among them, and what does that mean for the character of the legislature and government.*

B1.   VOTER CHOICE

An important feature of any electoral system is the ballot that the voter uses. Different systems provide voters with ballots that:
- require them to select a preferred *candidate,* or perhaps several candidates
- ask them to choose among *parties*
- allow them to choose among the candidates of a party
- allow them to weigh their vote (e.g. ¾ of a vote to one candidate, ¼ to another)
- allow them to indicate their ranking (1,2,3 etc.) of parties and/or candidates

Our BC system provides only the simplest sort of choice. Other systems can provide considerably more, although it should be noted that most of them do not use single-member electoral districts. Using more complex ballots can also make the outcome less transparent but there is no reason to believe that voters can not use them in an intelligent way.

How much and what kind of choice should an electoral system offer voters? How important is this aspect of a system?

B2.   IDENTIFIABLE REPRESENTATIVE

Elections allow voters to choose someone to represent them in the legislature – that might be an *individual* (as in our local single-member system) but it might also be a *party*.

Systems with identifiable local representatives tie particular politicians to a group of voters. In this way voters have a direct personal tie to the governing process – someone they can go to with a problem or with a concern.

Systems based on party representation generally do not have a clear single tie between voter and politician for several politicians from different parties my represent some large regional area.

How important is it to British Columbians to have their own MLA? Is there a limit to how big (in size or population) a district can get before this local tie looses much of its meaning? [MPs represent far more people than MLAs – do you think that difference matters?]

B3.   ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION

Voter turnout rates are falling in most western democracies. Political scientists used to believe that electoral systems had an impact on encouraging people to vote but this is not really very clear.
The only sure way to guarantee high levels of voter participation is to make voting compulsory as the Australians do.

But, in comparing electoral systems one might ask if they are clear, simple and provide voters with the information and choices that would encourage participation.

B4   EQUALITY OF THE VOTE

We have already considered this in terms of the working of the system, and especially its impact on the parties and how their votes translate into legislative seats.

It is also important to consider it from the perspective of the individual voter. Are they treated equally? Does the system advantage some voters or some groups?

We know that constituencies in northern BC typically have fewer people in them than those in the lower mainland. From the point of view of making sure the north gets a fair hearing this may be reasonable to some – but from the perspective of two brothers, one in the north, one in North Vancouver is it right?

Some of these problems disappear under different electoral systems. For instance, if the province was just one large district choosing members on a strict proportional basis then the brothers' votes would count equally. But of course under such a system there might be no guarantee that all the parts of the province would have a representative.

TRADE-OFFS

All these criteria seem important. It might be desirable to have a system that produced stable government with all parties represented proportionately, voters with a local member they could go to, and all votes counting equally.

Most systems are better at meeting some of these criteria than others. Ours might be rated as:

STRONG		*POOR*
Stable government		Parliamentary scrutiny
Electoral accountability		Fair representation
	Democratic parties	
Identifiable local representative		Maximum choice
	Encourages participation	
	Equal votes	

As we assess the workings of various electoral systems we want to keep in mind not only their individual characteristics but some of the trade-offs that might be involved in choosing one over another.

WHICH OF THESE CHARACTERISTICS ARE MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU? WHY?