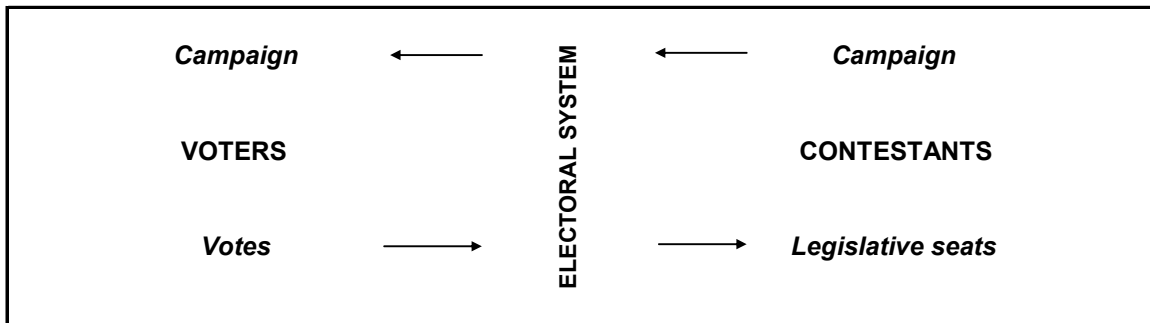**British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform**
3rd Weekend : Session 1 (Saturday morning, February 7, 2004)

Democratic Electoral Systems

How do we start thinking about elections?
At one level they are deceptively simple. Politicians compete for public support : Voters respond by indicating who they prefer. And the electoral system organizes, shapes and governs this process.

By creating the "exchange rate" between votes and seats — how many, and what kind of votes do you need to get a seat — the electoral system gives politicians incentives to organize and campaign in one way, creates barriers to others. It gives voters different kinds of choices, and the kinds of choices it provides affects the choices they make.

But in many ways this still doesn't answer our question about how to think about elections. How we answer it will lead us in our thinking about what sort of electoral system we need.

- Are elections simply one big contest? Should we think about a provincial election as really one province-wide contest? If so, then the province-wide vote total may be the most important result we need to know and it should provide the baseline against which we measure how well the electoral system works.

- Is a provincial election really nothing more than a collection of several individual contests (like a track and field meet with several different events)? After all they usually involve choosing many individuals. If so, are provincial totals really relevant?

- Who are the contestants in an election? Are they:

  → political parties?

  → individual candidates?

  Are their interests or needs the same? If they differ, where does the priority lie? Should we be concerned to judge an electoral system in terms of how it treats parties or candidates in producing final outcomes?

- Are elections for the contestants or the voters? From the voters' point of view is the important thing about the election the amount and kind of choices they have, or is it how well whatever choices they are able to make are translated into legislative seats and other results?

- Are elections for those are to be elected – that is the representatives? If so, should we judge electoral systems, then, in terms of the legislators they produce, considering our expectations of what they are to do and the variety of representatives we want in our legislatures?

  " . . there is no universally correct, most democratic electoral system . . "

Few political systems answer these questions in just the same way, so it is no surprise that few political systems organize their electoral practices in quiet the same way. As Farrell points out (ch.1) we can usefully identify three basic characteristics of most electoral systems.

- ❖ **District Magnitude** – a political science term that refers to the number of representatives chose from a particular area.

- ❖ **Ballot structure** – this simply refers to the kinds of choices that voters get when they go to vote

- ❖ **Electoral Formula** – this is the mathematical formula that decides how votes are turned into seats given the first two features

All three features are interconnected in every electoral system. They are not separate things, but are different aspects of a whole. Like the different parts of a human body they can be combined into all sorts of shapes and sizes. The combination we like is ultimately a matter of some combination of taste and need.

DISTRICT MAGNITUDE

- May range from 1 to the total number of seats
- Proportional systems require some districts with more than 1 representative
- Increasing size will increase potential proportionality – the limit to how proportional a system can be is determined by the district magnitude
- There is no need for district magnitudes to all be the same
- Districts, of differing sizes, can be piled on top of one another to create layered arrangements (votes can move from layer to layer under different circumstances)
- The 'personal connection' between voter and representative is likely to shift as the number of representatives from an area changes

In practice, district magnitudes do vary from 1 (the single-member constituencies we use) to systems where there are no constituencies and the whole country is the basic unit (Israel and Holland are examples).

BALLOT STRUCTURE

- Voters may indicate a single choice (for a party or candidate)
- Voters may indicate a set of preferences
- Voters may be able to weigh their vote

Farrell (p 170) provides a very useful chart that illustrates the range of ballot choices:

		Extent of Choice	
		Limited & Simple	*Indicate Preferences*
Nature of Choice	*Candidate*	Single-member Plurality (Canada)	Single Transferable Vote in multi-member districts (Ireland)
	Party	Closed list (Israel)	Open list (Finland)

- Ballot structures influence the balance of control between the parties and the voters with respective to who actually gets elected as a representative
- Ballot structures influence internal party decision-making with respect to nominations – closed list systems give the party 'list makers' significant power
- Control of the nomination process, especially if it effectively determines election prospects, can affect the nature and strength of party discipline in the legislature

ELECTORAL FORMULA

- The mathematics and procedures for determining how many votes are required for election, and just who gets elected

- May specify some kind of minimum electoral success before a party can gain any representation — this is called a **threshold**

- There is a wide variety of formulae available but they tend to be grouped by three basic principles: **plurality,   majority**, and **proportional**

Electoral systems are made up of a combination of these three features and countries build combinations that suit their needs. We know that "all electoral systems distort the election result " in some fashion, so the question for us is what sorts of distortions, and all that they bring in their wake, do we want? We know the advantages and disadvantages of our present system. We need to try and imagine how others would work here – a rather more difficult task as there are always likely to be uncertainties and unexpected developments when new systems are suddenly adopted by voters and politicians used to something else.

 ELECTORAL SYSTEM FAMILIES

We can categorize most of the existing electoral systems of democratic countries into five major groups, or families. We can call them families because while the various systems within each of them vary in a number of interesting ways all of them in the same family have a common set of characteristics and appear to behave in similar ways with somewhat predictable consequences. However, as with members of one of our own families, there is still plenty of room for variation and surprise.

PLURALITY SYSTEMS

- Based on the principle that the contestant with the most support ought to be elected

- Generally require simple and transparent voting and counting processes

MAJORITY SYSTEMS

- Based on the principle that an elected representative should be elected only if she or he has the support of more than half of the voters

- May require preferential voting or more than one round of voting if there are more than two candidates, or a natural majority does not exist

PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION (Party List) SYSTEMS

- Based on the assumption that parties are the real contestants and the principle that their seat shares should accurately reflect their vote shares

- Requires multi-member districts (the bigger the more proportional the final result can be)

- Counting and seat determination processes are generally complex and not immediately transparent

SINGLE TRANSFERABLE VOTE (Proportional) SYSTEM

- Based on the assumption that voters should be able to choose among candidates irrespective of party – it is effectively a proportional system

- Proportionality modified by the need to keep district magnitudes manageable for meaningful voter choice

- Counting processes can be complex

- Where party voting is strong, candidates are often in competition with running mates

MIXED SYSTEMS

- Involve combinations of the other four basic families within a single system

- Generally designed to introduce an element of proportionality

- May mix different types of electoral families across the entire country, or mix different types in different parts of the country

- Can produce legislators with different mandates, different constituencies, different roles

The accompanying chart summarizes the range of different systems and indicates some of the countries that use electoral processes that fall within each of these basic families. Choosing between them involves answers to several key questions:

➢ Do you want a proportional system? If so, how proportional must it be?

➢ Do you want to provide for local representation? If so, how big should the area represented be? How many representatives should it have?

➢ What kind of choices should voters have on their ballots?

➢ How important is it that the mechanics of the systems be simple and transparent?

Answering those questions will quickly narrow down the options, but of course before one can answer them it is important to be clear on what the consequences of any one answer, and any combination of answers, is for the working of the wider politics and government of a community.

Two Charts:

Electoral Systems

Thresholds of Representation

These are taken from an article entitled "Electoral Systems" by André Blais and Louis. Massicotte in the book *Comparing Democracies 2*, edited by Lawrence LeDuc, Richard G. Niemi, and Pippa Norris (Sage: 2002) pp 40-69.

TRENDS ?

- Early electoral systems were mainly based on the Plurality principle

- During the 19th century Majority systems became more popular and more widely adopted

- Proportional Representation list systems were widely adopted in the opening decades of the 20th century, often at the time the right to vote was being expanded. They were seen as a way of ensuring that no one group (for instance, working class socialists) would be able to capture a majority

- Curiously, PR systems made little headway in the democracies that were descended from the British parliament (with the exceptions of the adoption of the Single Transferable Vote by Ireland and Tasmania).

  → Australian upper houses began adopting STV in 1949 and now over half have done so.

- In the last decade of the 20th century there was a sudden revival of interest in electoral system change, reform and experimentation:

  → the creation of new democracies in once Communist parts of Eastern Europe

  → the decision of established democracies to try and change their politics by altering their electoral system. Some went from plurality to PR (New Zealand), others moved in the other direction (Italy) while others moved to new complicated mixed systems (Japan)

  → the adoption by Britain of different systems for different elections

- The recent past has seen a sharp growth in the interest in proportional electoral arrangements and the adoption of Mixed electoral systems in an attempt to reap the perceived benefits of more than one type of electoral family

OUR REVIEW OF THE FAMILIES

In our review of these five families we shall try to follow a common path, asking about the following issues:

1. **The Basic Principles**

2. **Key Elements**

    a) District magnitude(s)
    b) Ballot structure, including the number of votes
    c) Formula

3. **The range of variation on each of the elements**

4. **Exploration of how the systems work, for candidates, parties and voters**

    a) Examples of 2 or 3 places that use (variations of the) family
    b) Description of how they work in practice
    c) Illustrative materials, sample ballots etc.

5. **Evaluation of system impacts in terms of Weekend 1 : Session 3 criteria**

    → *Impact on the working of government:*

    a) Stable and effective government
    b) Electoral accountability
    c) Parliamentary check on government / role of elected representatives
    d) Fair representation for parties and groups
    e) Democratic political parties

    → *Impact on the voters:*

    f) Choices for the voter
    g) Identifiable representation
    h) Encouragement to participate
    i) Equality of the vote

6. **Assessment of trade-offs involved in adopting an electoral system from the family**

7. **What such a system might look like in BC**

If we can stick to the same outline for our consideration of the different families then we can be in a better position to compare them.

Remember that each family can allow for a good deal of variation within it and once we have made some preliminary decisions about the type of family we might think best for BC then there will still be plenty of specific detailed questions to ask and answer.