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

The Citizens' Assembly must assess models for electing Members of the Legislative Assembly and issue a report recommending whether the current model for these elections should be retained or another model should be adopted.

Terms of Reference (1)

"We have a flourishing democracy in which voters hold parties and governments accountable and we would not want to abandon such a system unless it was clear that: 1) the system had deficiencies that detracted from the evolution and maintenance of healthy democratic politics in the province, and 2) we were convinced that there was an alternate system that could be adopted that would speak to the identified deficiencies."

Preliminary Statement of CA

Are there problems with the current electoral system?

Do we know what they are?

Is there an alternative that would address those issues?

What will be the new problems that the alternative will create?

Will the cure be worse than the disease?

Thinking about Electoral System Impacts

The mandate requires the Assembly to assess the way in which the electoral system turns votes into seats AND to consider the implications of any electoral change for the working of British Columbia governance.

This suggests two ways to approach the issue:

1) *From the perspective of the electoral process*.
   What system best suits the imperatives of providing for the democratic representation of public preferences? What are elections about? What are they for?
   Does BC need a system that accurately mirrors the many and diverse views of British Columbians OR does it need a system that is more likely to foster a decisive choice between focused governing alternatives?

2) *From the perspective of the legislative and governing process.*
   What is the desirable relationship between the Legislature and Government? How can the electoral process shape it?
   Does the province want a system that gives the Government a secure mandate, so that it may pursue its agenda unhampered by any significant legislative check OR does it need a system in which the life of minority or coalition governments is subject to the will of the legislature?

While advocates of different electoral systems generally speak to both of these perspectives, those advocating PR systems of various kinds are generally inclined to emphasize the first (the questions of representational politics), while those favouring non-Proportional systems tend to focus on the second (the problems of governing).
For a balanced assessment it is important that both perspectives be addressed.

In thinking about how a different system might work, it is important to recognize that one cannot extrapolate from previous electoral results and know how elections would come out and legislatures would work. Under a new electoral system there would very likely be a different mix of politicians and parties to choose from, and voters would likely vote differently. We know this from experience in BC. In 1952, the plurality system was changed to a preferential majority system. The governing Liberals and Conservatives made the change assuming that voters would respond in predictable ways. Instead a new party (Social Credit) took advantage of the new possibilities opened by the change to the electoral system: it ran candidates all across the province and voters switched to it in huge numbers. The result was that BC was run by Social Credit majority governments for the next 40 years.

General Characteristics of Electoral System Families

The mandate of the Assembly directs it to assess any alternative system against the current single-member plurality electoral system currently in use in British Columbia. That makes the plurality system and its impact on the working of the legislature and government, the benchmark against which any alternative must be judged.

The following chart compares the five basic families of electoral systems in terms of the three major dimensions. Within any particular family there are many variations possible but these dimensions represent the basic axes on which electoral systems are organized.

Proportionality divides systems between those that see elections as ultimately about system-wide choices between political parties and those that cast them as a set of local contests among competing candidates.

Local Representation divides systems in terms of the extent to which the interests and perspectives of 'local' communities are felt in their electoral politics.

Voter choice refers to the range and kinds of choices voters have on the ballot paper. A basic distinction is between whether their immediate vote is for a party, an individual candidate or, in some instances, both.

	Proportional			*Non-Proportional*	
	List PR	**Mixed**	**STV**	**Plurality**	**Majority**
Local Representation		X	X	X	X
Voter Choice: Party	X	x *	X		
Candidate	x **	X	X	X	X

* In mixed systems voters typically have two votes (one for a local candidate and one for their preferred party) but in some they may only cast one vote (with local candidate votes being summed to constitute the party vote).

** Open lists can provide the voters with some power to choose amongst candidates

Electoral and Political Dynamics:
Proportional vs. Non-Proportional Systems

This chart summarizes, in a very <u>general</u> way, the different patterns expected of proportional and non-proportional electoral systems. In practice, in any specific case, much depends upon the details of the particular system.

	Proportional	*Non-Proportional*
Representation	Partisan	Geographic
Voters' choice	Party	Candidate
Election outcome	One bottom-line (vote share) score	Sum of individual contests
Election results	Party seat shares reflect vote shares	Large parties over-represented
Electoral competition	Facilitates multi-party competition	Encourages 2-party competition
Political parties	More, differentiated parties	Few, broadly based parties
Party organization	Centralized	Decentralized
Party appeals	Narrower, ideological or interest	Wide, catch-all
Elections	Expressions of political preferences	Contests to choose Governments
Legislature	More parties, with more seats, in legislature	Small number of parties with significant representation
Government	Minority *OR* multi-party coalition formed by politicians after election	Single-party majority based on election victory
Cabinet durability	Shorter life	Longer life
Check on Government	Modest: depends on coalition balance and use of committees	Little: disciplined backbench and impotent opposition Members
Legislative membership	Party leadership can establish representative membership	Consequence of separate individual local decisions

Proportionality

The basic idea of a proportional (PR) electoral system is that the share of the legislative seats a party wins ought to reflect the share of the votes it won.

In practice no system is perfectly proportional:
- District magnitude constrains proportionality (higher DM increases proportionality)
- Different formula may be applied at different levels (tiers)
- Thresholds may discriminate against some (smaller) parties
- Different quotas/formula* have differing impact on extent of proportionality
- The proportional element may not be applied to the entire system (e.g., MMM)
- Result: the largest parties are generally favoured with some seat advantage

This suggests it is useful to think of proportionality as a relative rather than an absolute property of an electoral system. It is possible to move towards a fully proportional outcome, but one might also opt to simply mitigate the penalty of no representation suffered by small parties by giving them some limited representation. And there is obviously a host of intermediate positions.

In terms of proportionality we can order electoral system families:

HIGH   LOW

List PR   **← Mixed →**   **Plurality   Majority**
                                            STV

It is difficult to make precise statements about the exact proportionality of both Mixed and STV systems for much will depend on the detail as well as the number of parties.

In general:
- The proportionality of *Mixed* systems will depend upon
  - the proportion of PR seats
  - whether the PR component is complementary (MMP) or supplementary (MMM)
  - the District Magnitude for the proportional seats
  - level at which PR seats are: a) determined, b) allocated
  - the formula or quota used
  - applicable thresholds

- The proportionality of *STV* systems will be shaped by
  - the District Magnitude
  - the quota used

* Quotas (Hare, Droop, Imperiali) are used in largest remainder calculations
   Formula (Sainte Laguë –pure or modified– & d'Hondt) are used in largest average
               calculations

Local Representation

Westminster-style parliamentary systems have long been organized on the assumption that the most important basis for representation in the legislature is community. As a result, members of the legislature are chosen to represent specific geographic areas.

This pattern:
- Establishes a clear link (and possibility of electoral accountability) between voters and their identified representative: voters know who to go to – politicians know who they answer to on election day
- Assures that all (geographic) parts of a political system have a representative speaking for them in the legislature

The reality of local representation is often questioned as:
- Party discipline forces representatives to vote the party line in the legislature even if that goes against local opinion or interest, or the personal views of the representative

While this is undoubtedly true, it is also the case that:
- Local representatives have an impact on shaping party policy through their continuing activity in caucus
- Local Members serve individual constituents as key conduits to government and play an important "ombudsman" role in serving local voters

Local representation is often associated with a single member for separate identifiable geographic area but some multi-member district systems also foster a strong local dimension to the representative process.

On a general scale of their propensity to stimulate local representation we can order electoral system families:

HIGH_____LOW

  STV   **Majority** **Plurality**   **Mixed**   **List PR**

                                              ←   →
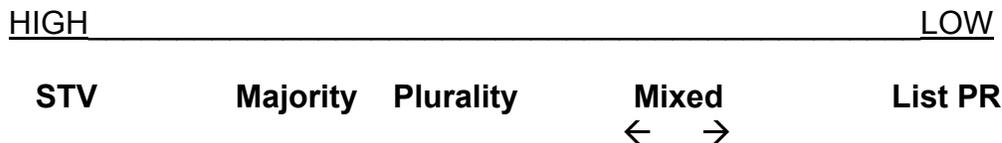
Mixed systems will vary depending upon
- the proportion of the seats assigned to single-member districts
- whether PR seats are allocated and then assigned on a regional or system-wide basis
- whether lists are open or closed

Voter Choice

The choice the voter is presented with is largely determined by the number and nature of the political parties contesting the election.

Nomination of candidates by political parties, as well as the rules which govern party access to the ballot, are critical and obviously shape much of real electoral choice. Preferential ballots (including open lists) attempt to open this process by giving voters a greater say in determining just which of a party's candidates is elected.

Ballot forms structure the particular decision facing voters. They may
- allow for the simple selection of one candidate or party
- allow for a rank ordering of candidates or parties
- allow for a rank ordering of all candidates and parties
- allow for voters to weight their ballots
- allow for voters to signal approval OR rejection of any/all candidates or parties

Different electoral systems can adopt any appropriate ballot form but the following summarizes the general pattern:

Plurality	Simple indication of preferred candidate(s)	
Majority	Preferential ballots on which voters rank order their preferred candidates	*Open as to how many candidates need to be ranked*
STV	Preferential ballots on which voters rank order their preferred candidates	*Voters may cross party lines in ranking*
		Open as to how many candidates need to be ranked
PR List	Voters indicate a party preference either by selecting a list or candidate	*Open lists allow voters to influence which of parties' candidates are elected*
Mixed	Either nominal or preferential selection of constituency candidate	*May combine the two into one choice by counting candidate votes as the party vote*
	Party list voting in PR component	

Legislative Vacancies

Electoral systems must deal with the issue of how to deal with seat vacancies that may occur between general elections through the death, resignation or expulsion of a Member. There is a range of choices but the following are the typical choices.

List PR	Appoint the next candidate on the list from the party of the Member whose seat has been vacated *This maintains the proportionality of the Legislature as determined by the previous general election*
STV	Go back to the rank order of the candidates of the party in question and appoint the next strongest candidate *This maintains the proportionality of the Legislature as determined by the previous general election. It also requires that parties run a full slate of candidates even if they do not expect to win many seats in the general election* OR Hold a by-election to fill the single vacancy. This effectively becomes a majority contest *This system is likely to favour one of the largest parties and does not help maintain the proportionality established at the general election*
Mixed	Typically different rules are used for the two parts of the system: A vacancy in a <u>list seat</u> is generally replaced by selecting the next candidate (indicated by the party on a closed list or the voters on an open one) from the relevant party list *This maintains the proportionality of the Legislature as determined by the previous general election* A vacancy in a <u>constituency seat</u> is generally replaced by a by-election using the same rules as the general election (though alternates could be designated on the ballot making this unnecessary). *This is likely to favour large parties and so change the balance of legislative seats that provided the original basis for the proportional allocation in an MMP system. That is not an issue in MMM systems*
Plurality	A local by-election *(although alternates could be designated on the original ballot which would eliminate the need for a by-election)*
Majority	A local by-election *(although alternates could be designated on the original ballot which would eliminate the need for a by-election)*

Decisions required to identify an alternate Electoral System

If the Assembly decides to recommend an alternative electoral system, these are the basic decisions that it would be necessary to make in identifying a model for British Columbia. Decisions about the candidate and party ***nomination*** process might be included for any or all:

Plurality	None – the status quo (Any desired fine-tuning?)
Majority	Provision for preferential ballots and vote transfer rules OR sequential balloting scheme
STV	District magnitude(s) – uniform or varied across the province Ballot completion rules Quota & vote transfer rules Seat vacancy provision
List PR	Ballot form – open or closed list One or more tiers (and basis for them) The formula or quota used to determine party allocations The threshold(s) Seat vacancy provision
Mixed	<u>Mixed Majoritarian</u> (MMM) or <u>Mixed Proportional</u> (MMP) The balance between local candidate and proportional seats Candidate eligibility (local *and/or* list) Seat vacancy provisions for both parts of the system: *Candidate seats* Majority or plurality rule – if majority, then provision for preferential ballots and vote transfer rules OR sequential balloting scheme *Proportional seats* Regional or provincial lists Level seats allocated and then assigned (regional or provincial) Ballot form – open or closed list The formula or quota used to determine party allocations The threshold(s) <u>Mixed Compensatory (MMC)</u> The rules by which small parties otherwise excluded might be awarded some small number of seats The key questions would be How many? and Who?