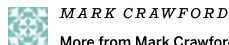


Opinion: Deliberative polling a route to electoral reform



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The new NDP government is committed to “making democracy work for people” as the first order of business this fall under the terms of its agreement with the Green party caucus. That deal promises a referendum in the fall of 2018 concurrent with municipal elections and an agreement to “work together in good faith to consult British Columbians on the type of proportional representation (PR)” to be proposed.

Referendums pose two significant challenges to electoral reformers. The first is one of information: Are voters sufficiently knowledgeable about the working of the electoral system and sufficiently motivated to learn, so as to be able to evaluate claims made for and against PR? The second is one of civic virtue: Are voters, even if highly rational and well-informed, sufficiently sensitized to the rights of minorities and to broader considerations of the common good, or are they inclined to simply opt for continuation of a near-duopoly on the grounds of self-interest if they happen to already support one of the two largest parties?

Opponents of PR can easily benefit from factual uncertainty and from the very marginalization of minority opinion that PR seeks to remedy. That is why many PR advocates reject the idea of a referendum altogether, or would prefer a set of procedures that could somehow ensure that the debate leading up to the referendum better satisfies the criteria of “deliberative democracy” — i.e. discussion that is more reasoned, other-regarding, equal and inclusive than most referendum and election campaigns usually are.

One way of closing this deliberative gap would be to strike a new Citizens' Assembly and structure its interactions with the legislature, the media and the public in a different way. Unfortunately, such an option is probably not realistic under present circumstances, because of the political precariousness of the government and the tightness of its legislative timetable.

Nevertheless, there is another approach to improving the quality of referendum debates, and therefore the chances of PR advocates to win them. Instead of a single group of individuals spending an entire year of weekends exhaustively studying a question and then coming up with a single immutable recommendation that is presented to an unprepared public, a continuous series of smaller polling and voting events could take place, involving different groups of citizens meeting for a single weekend in the period leading up to the referendum. These "deliberative polls" are typically two-day events that aim to reveal the conclusions the public would reach if it had the opportunity to become more informed and more engaged. The participants are selected at random and are asked to respond to a set of survey questions and to study a pack of balanced briefing materials provided by the organizers beforehand.

During the weekend, the bulk of the work takes place in small groups that then feed back into plenary sessions where group members have the opportunity to put questions to a panel of experts. Then participants are once again surveyed at the end of the process, indicating how successful deliberation has been in changing voter preferences. These procedures have been used in several countries to help government deal with many issues, for example the discrimination against Roma in Bulgaria, the future of electric utilities in Texas, and the future of the monarchy in Australia.

Such mini-publics of course have the downside that many participants will still have considerable gaps in their knowledge after just a two-day event. On the more positive side, the record of deliberative polls shows an increase in agreement about which issues are the most salient, and also the development of a more "other-regarding" dimension in voter preferences that narrows the range of disagreement about particular reform options. These two features could go a long way toward ensuring "good faith" consultations in a context where both the committee and legislature are likely to remain balanced on a hyper-partisan knife-edge. If media coverage of results is sufficiently extensive, then there is an improved chance that B.C.'s voters will be more disposed to follow the example and advice of their fellow citizen-deliberators than they have been in the past.

Without an extraordinary procedure of this kind, the cause of PR is likely to be portrayed, and perceived, in partisan terms, with the vote in 2018 more of a referendum on the ruling NDP-Green alliance than a reasoned deliberation about how to improve our democracy. And that could mean another wasted opportunity.

Mark Crawford is a professor of political science who teaches Canadian Government and Democratic Theory at Athabasca University.