

Electoral Reform: Are there better ways to consult the public than opinion surveys?



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FILE PHOTO - Grade 10 students (from left) Robert Sage, Caitlin Thornton and Cassie Daniels vote at a voting booth as they participate in Student Vote Canada at Crestwood Secondary School in Peterborough, Ont. on Thursday, Jan. 19, 2006. *CLIFFORD SKARSTEDT /*

We've all had the experience: you get up from the dinner table to answer the phone, only to find it's a pollster, wanting to ask a "very short" series of questions about an issue you know little about.

Depending on your mood, you either fend off the invitation or, out of a sense of citizenship — a sense that you should be contributing to the public conversation — you decide to answer, perhaps thinking, "Better me than someone else."

Then, under pressure to respond to all the questions, you make a series of under-educated guesses, which the polling company later compiles into an apparently conclusive and surprisingly compelling result.

This, it turns out, is an effective way to gather public opinion about soap or cellphones. But it's a poor basis on which to reform an electoral system.

Electoral reform is a crucial issue and one that most people take seriously. Even if they haven't considered all the implications, people generally have clear values and preferences for how they would like their politicians to act and how they want their government to produce public policy.

But the mechanics of voting alternatives are complicated and arcane. Even many political scientists would stumble over explanations of Single Member Plurality, Mixed Member Proportional or Single Transferable Vote systems.

That raises an urgent question: given that the provincial government has committed to holding a referendum on electoral reform sometime in the next year, how do we generate an informed public conversation about which electoral system might best engender legitimacy, inclusion, stability and fairness — which system might best lead to good government?

Fortunately, there are a few well-tested processes by which people can learn and deliberate about important public issues before coming to judgment. All involve what political scientists refer to as "deliberative mini-publics" — small groups that can credibly represent the public at large. These are not politicians — not partisans; they are citizens whose only investment is their stake in good government.

British Columbians are already familiar with one deliberative process. In 2003, the provincial government convened a Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, a deliberative body of 170 individuals, near-randomly selected from each of B.C.'s 79 electoral districts. The Assembly met, researched and deliberated for almost a year before recommending a kind of proportional electoral system called Single Transferable Vote — a result that was endorsed in a 2005 referendum by a 57.7-per-cent majority, but fell shy of a previously established 60 per

cent requirement.

A second, faster and less-expensive alternative is called Deliberative Polling, which combines the techniques of public opinion research and public deliberation to try to understand what public opinion on a particular issue might look like if citizens were given a chance to become more informed and to deliberate about their preferences.

Developed in 1988 by James Fishkin, a Professor of Communications at Stanford, Deliberative Polling has been used by local and regional governments around the world. The process generally involves a larger mini-public but a shorter time frame. A random group of around 250 is assembled and polled. They get a briefing package a week before the main session and then spend a weekend, first learning about, and then deliberating on the issue in question. Then, they are polled again.

That, importantly, is what produces the result. The group doesn't make a recommendation; rather, the important result is the shift in opinion — it comes from understanding how a representative group would view the issue if they had a chance to learn and think about it. That knowledge can then inform the public conversation, particularly because, in an age of increasing distrust of government, voters are more likely to take seriously the guidance of a representative group of citizens.

We have a chance in B.C. in the coming year to carefully consider the fairness, effectiveness, inclusiveness, and stability of our electoral system. Before we make up our minds, it would be good to really understand the choices. Deliberative Polling is one option that might get us, affordably and quickly, to that goal.

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