

Summary

Ontario's Referendum on Proportional Representation: Why Citizens Said No
Laura B. Stephenson and Brian Tanguay

Calls for democratic reform have been common across Canada in recent years. Ontario's experience with addressing this issue included considering a change to a mixed member proportional (MMP) electoral system, which was proposed by the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform. In a referendum vote, held in October 2007, Ontarians clearly rejected the switch to the proposed MMP system.

In this paper, Laura Stephenson and Brian Tanguay investigate several aspects of Ontario's recent experience with electoral reform, from the political context that brought about the process, to the details of the citizens' assembly, to attitudes of Ontarians about electoral reform. They argue that the issue of electoral reform in Ontario was not highly politicized. There was no history of mobilization by high-profile political actors in support of a more proportional electoral system, and Ontario had not experienced a recent electoral triumph by a "wrong winner" – a situation where the party with the second-most votes obtains a majority of the legislative seats, thanks to the peculiarities of the current first past the post (FPTP) system. The referendum also received limited attention from the public, being almost an afterthought in the 2007 campaign.

Given the lack of attention to the referendum, the question of how Ontarians voted in it, and why, is particularly interesting to investigate. The authors draw upon data from a survey of one thousand Ontarians conducted immediately after the election to analyze the factors that contributed to voters' choices. Three particular aspects of voting are explored. First, the authors explore the attitudes that Ontarians hold about elections, voting, fairness and proportionality, and whether these attitudes were salient factors in voting for or against the MMP electoral system. Although they find little evidence of strong discontent with the electoral system, they do find that cynicism about government was a factor in the referendum, as the most cynical voters were more likely not to vote, and informed cynical voters were significantly more likely to oppose the electoral change. However, dissatisfaction with democracy and opinions about the appropriate proportionality of electoral outcomes did not even register as significant influences on referendum voting for those who did go to the polls.

The authors also analyze whether the political parties, and their interests, played a role in people's attitudes and in how they voted in the referendum. The results suggest that there was a division between the larger (Liberal, PC) and smaller (NDP, Green) parties in terms of support for the proposal, but that partisans of the three main parties in the province (Liberal, PC, NDP) were largely unsure of the positions on MMP adopted by their own parties. Not surprisingly, then, partisanship, as well as specific knowledge of the preferred outcome of a party, had little effect on the outcome of the referendum vote.

Finally, the role of information in the referendum vote is analyzed. Over 65 percent of voters felt that they were either very familiar or somewhat familiar with the MMP system proposed by the citizens' assembly, and these voters were more likely to support the electoral change. Only those who felt familiar with the MMP electoral system considered attitudes that related directly to electoral reform in their referendum voting decision. Those who felt less informed, even if they felt strongly about proportionality and fairness in elections, were not influenced by those attitudes to support the change to an electoral system that promised to address both of these issues. However, those who felt less informed were more likely to be swayed by partisan considerations, although not specifically by the preferences of their preferred party.

The authors demonstrate that even if the referendum campaign had been more informative, the MMP proposal would not likely have obtained the 60 percent support required in order to pass. Even if individuals were familiar with the electoral system, and were influenced by concerns for proportionality and fairness, these attitudes were not dominant in society, and therefore having citizens more likely to make the connection between the referendum vote and these attitudes would not have changed the outcome.