The 2007 Ontario Electoral System Referendum: Information, Interest, and Democratic Renewal

Laura Stephenson
University of Western Ontario

and

Brian Tanguay
Wilfrid Laurier University

Introduction

After being elected in 2003, Premier Dalton McGuinty took steps to modernize Ontario's elections in response to falling turnout rates and perceived voter apathy. Through the office of the Minister for Democratic Renewal, the government established fixed election dates, changed elements of the voting process (such as the number of advance polling days) to accommodate Ontarians and simplify/modernize the voting process, and established the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform. The Citizens' Assembly was made up of 103 Ontarians chosen from around the province, brought together to learn about the principles and types of electoral systems and then to decide whether to propose a new system, and if so, to choose a system that would be best for the province. The government promised to honour the results of the referendum if it indicated that Ontarians wanted a change.

The objective of this paper is to investigate the factors that contributed to how Ontarians voted in the 2007 referendum on the electoral system. This issue is of particular interest for two reasons. First, the democratic deficit has received increasing attention for several years in all provinces and in Canada as a whole. Calls for more proportionality in elections have resulted in a number of provinces (B.C., PEI, N.S., Quebec) entertaining the idea of changing their electoral system. Thus, Ontario's referendum fits into the broader trend of reconsidering how Canadians elect their representatives. Second, the referendum received little attention in Ontario, being almost an afterthought in the 2007 campaign. Elections Ontario, which conducted the information campaign, was soundly criticized for failing to do more to educate Ontarians about the choice they were asked to make. Given this, the question of how Ontarians voted in the referendum, and why, is particularly interesting to investigate.

This paper focuses on understanding voting in the Ontario referendum through three lenses. First, we delve into the attitudes that Ontarians hold about elections, voting, fairness and proportionality. Using this information, we seek to understand whether concerns about the quality of democracy, the reason for which the process was originally initiated by McGuinty, were salient factors in voting for or against the MMP system. Second, we consider whether the political parties, and their interests, played a role in people's attitudes and how they voted in the referendum. Specifically, we are interested in understanding whether supporters of the major parties (the Ontario Liberals and Progressive Conservatives) viewed the issue differently than minor party (NDP and Green) supporters, given the strategic considerations of their respective parties. One of the considerations that had some public salience about the proposed MMP system was that it would produce coalition or minority governments. The potential decline in power that this represented for the Liberals or Progressive Conservatives may have influenced how their supporters viewed changing the electoral system. On the other hand, all of the parties avoided making the referendum a major issue in the campaign, and so whether or not NDP and Green Party supporters understood the potential benefits for their parties in terms of legislative power is unclear. Finally, we assess whether Ontarians were informed about the referendum and the Mixed Member Proportional electoral system proposed by the Citizens' Assembly that was offered as the alternative to the current First Past the Post System. How did information, or lack thereof, contribute to referendum vote choice?

This paper draws upon data gathered in a post-election survey of 1000 Ontarians conducted between October 11 and 28, 2007 by Léger Marketing.[1]

Background: The "Democratic Deficit"

Since the mid-1980s, observers of Canada's political system have become increasingly concerned by what they see as a growing "democratic deficit" in the country. Originally a term applied to the imbalance in executive and legislative powers within the European Union, "democratic deficit" is now used somewhat loosely to describe the perceived loss of control over their own political destinies experienced by many citizens in an age of rapid globalization. A combination of long-term and short-term factors—generational value change, shifts in the global political economy, a declining faith among some sectors of society in the Enlightenment discourses of progress and freedom, the aging of traditional representative institutions (many political parties have been around in their present form since the mid-to-late 1800s), repeated political scandals in a number of countries—have helped to fuel this worry over the democratic deficit. More and more voters in the industrialized nations seem to be convinced that the traditional mechanisms of representative democracy—political parties, elections and territorially-based legislatures—are simply not up to the task of articulating or defending the interests of the vast majority of citizens in the current era.[2]

In Canada, a series of political convulsions since the mid-1980s helped to reinforce voter scepticism about the political class and political institutions in the country. The controversy surrounding the binge of patronage appointments in the last days of Pierre Trudeau's regime in 1984, the free trade election of 1988, the rancorous debate over the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax, the collapse of the Meech Lake Accord, the referendum on the Charlottetown Accord, the 1993 electoral earthquake which reduced the sitting government to a legislative rump of two MPs, the narrow victory of the federalist forces in the 1995 referendum on Quebec sovereignty: each of these events reignited debate over the effectiveness and legitimacy of the country's political institutions.

Paul Martin Jr., while he was campaigning to succeed Jean Chrétien as leader of the Liberal Party of Canada and Prime Minister, very effectively voiced this sense of disquiet about our political system. In an important speech on parliamentary reform and public ethics that he delivered at Osgoode Hall in the fall of 2002, Martin pointed to the precipitous drop in voter turnout in recent federal elections as a symptom of more fundamental problems in our democratic system. In the general elections of 1997 and 2000, he noted, non-voters outnumbered those who supported the winning party, by a considerable margin. Martin acknowledged that particular circumstances in each election might account for some of the drop in political interest among voters, but he nonetheless argued that "at some stage we have

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[2] This discussion of the various meanings of "democratic deficit" and its relevance for an understanding of contemporary Canadian politics at the federal level draws on Tanguay (2004: 264-75).

to face up to the fact: *something is going wrong here, and in a fundamental way*. Casting a ballot is the most basic function of our democratic system. That so many Canadians choose not to do so is the political equivalent of the canary in the coalmine…. far too many Canadians cannot be bothered to vote because they don't think their vote matters" (Martin, 2002-2003: 11; emphasis added). Martin singled out the "mindless adversarialism" in the House of Commons, the centralization of power in the Prime Minister's Office, and rigid party discipline as primary factors contributing to the growth of this democratic deficit.

Declining voter turnout, declining levels of public trust and confidence in political institutions, and increasing disengagement of young citizens from the political process are among the most important symptoms of this democratic deficit, both in Canada and in other liberal democracies, and each will be discussed briefly in turn (Johnston, Krahn and Harrison 2006: 166; Tanguay 2004: 267-71). Figure 1 displays data for turnout in federal elections in Canada from 1945 to 2006, expressed as a percentage of registered voters. Throughout most of the postwar period, voter turnout averaged in the mid- to high 70s; the sole exceptions were the elections of 1953 (68 percent), 1974 (71 percent) and 1980 (69 percent). Pammett and LeDuc (2003: 4) note that these three "exceptional" elections were held either at the height of the summer (August 1953 and July 1974) or during the winter (February 1980). Each took place in an exceptional political situation as well: "The 1953 election came during a long period of one-party dominance. The 1974 and 1980 elections were occasioned by the fall of minority governments and held in a climate of relative public dissatisfaction with politics in general."

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Since 1988, however, turnout declined in each successive election, from 70 percent in 1993, to 67 percent in 1997, and to an all-time low of 61 percent in 2000 (International IDEA, 2003; Centre for Research and Information on Canada [CRIC], 2003). Only in the most recent election of 2006 did turnout experience a modest increase, to almost 65 percent of registered voters. Data gathered by the Centre for Research and Information on Canada indicate that declines in voter turnout have occurred in most provincial elections since 1980 as well, with Prince Edward Island being the only notable exception to this trend (CRIC, 2003).

A second symptom of the democratic deficit or democratic malaise in Canada and other liberal democracies is the pervasive public mistrust of politicians and government, which has been growing stronger over the past three decades or so. A recent analysis of survey data from about twenty of the so-called Trilateral democracies concluded that between the mid-1970s and the present there has been a steady decline in public confidence in politicians in 12 out of 13 countries for which data are available; a similar decline in confidence in legislatures has occurred in 11 out of the 14 countries. Over the same period, membership in political parties in most of these countries has plummeted, and the percentage of citizens expressing a partisan attachment (party identification) has also declined significantly (Putnam, Pharr and Dalton, 2000: 14, 17, 19).

In their study of non-voters in Canada, Pammett and LeDuc (2003: 7) noted that an overwhelming majority of Canadians—almost 70 percent—cite "negative public attitudes toward the performance of … politicians and political institutions" as the principal factor underlying declining voter turnout in the country. Politicians have become a lightning rod for voter discontent in Canada, as they have elsewhere in the industrialized democracies. Pammett and LeDuc remark that there "is a widespread perception that politicians are untrustworthy, selfish, unaccountable, lack credibility, are not true to their word, etc."

The third symptom of the democratic malaise is the disengagement of young citizens from the political process in general, and from the act of voting in particular. As Thomas Axworthy puts it, "turnout has not declined in the electorate as a whole but it has fallen like a stone among Canadians born after 1970" (2003-2004: 16). Pammett and LeDuc's study of non-voters demonstrates that Canadians born after 1975, those 25 years and under, are far less likely to vote than their elders. Only 22 percent of voters between the ages of 18 and 20, and 28 percent of those aged 21 to 24 bothered to vote. Voter turnout increases with each successive age cohort: 83 percent of voters 68 years or older cast a ballot in 2000, as did 80 percent of those aged 58 to 67. Young voters are not necessarily more cynical about politics than their older counterparts—in fact they are slightly less so (Blais et al., 2002: 54)—but they are markedly less interested in or informed about politics than any previous generation. They are, in the words of Gidengil et al., a "tuned out" generation rather than a "turned off" one (2003: 11; cf. Blais et al., 2002: 57, 61).

Throughout the 1990s, various groups advocated a host of institutional reforms that they felt would help address the democratic deficit and revitalize the Canadian political system. For the neo-populist Reform Party and its supporters, to take one important example, the underlying cause of the democratic deficit was the nature of political representation itself (Johnston, Krahn and Harrison 2006: 168). Their diagnosis led them to call for an assortment of populist measures that would either bypass the party system altogether or entail a radical transformation of the "old-line" party organizations: citizen initiatives, greater use of referenda to decide major issues of public policy, a recall mechanism whereby constituents could "fire" MPs deemed to be incompetent or corrupt, relaxation of party discipline in the House of Commons, more free votes in Parliament, limits on the number of terms of office an elected official could hold, and an impeachment process that would allow "an incumbent prime minister [to] be removed from office by the citizens directly rather than by his or her political party membership" (Canada, Citizens' Forum on the Future of Canada 1991: 104).

Other civil society organizations, such as Democracy Watch, Fair Vote Canada, Equal Voice, and the *Mouvement pour une démocratie nouvelle* (MDN), among many others, actively championed the need for a more proportional electoral system as an essential first step toward making our democratic institutions adequately inclusive, responsive and effective. Among the *possible* benefits of a PR or mixed proportional electoral system, according to its advocates, would be increased voter turnout and greater mobilization of young citizens in the political system. Advocates of proportional representation electoral systems contend that under the existing first-past-the-post system, supporters of newer, non-traditional parties such as the

Green Party have little incentive to go to the polls, since their votes are, in essence, wasted. "Some researchers have concluded that, other things being equal, countries that use a form of PR tend to have higher turnout" (Seidle, 2002: 28).

According to data compiled by International IDEA, electoral systems do have a modest impact on voter turnout: average turnout in plurality-majority systems (like FPTP), as well as in mixed or hybrid systems (PR plus plurality), is 59-60 percent, as opposed to 68 percent in straight PR systems (IDEA, n.d.). Blais, Massicotte and Dobrzynska (2003:1) contend that turnout is "5 to 6 points higher in countries where the electoral system is proportional or mixed compensatory." Seidle cautions, however, that the experience of New Zealand, which switched from FPTP to a German-style mixed-member proportional (MMP) system in 1996, is inconclusive: "the significant debate about [electoral] reform as well as its successful implementation has not improved participation rates much beyond the 79 percent of 1993," when FPTP was in use. He also notes that voter turnout has been dropping in the past decade in most OECD countries, including those with PR systems, like the Netherlands, Ireland, Finland and Austria (Seidle, 2002: 28).

Experience with Electoral Reform – Federal and Provincial

Advocates of electoral reform in Canada argued that a more proportional system of voting could also have a beneficial effect on youth participation in politics. As the Law Commission of Canada stated in its report on electoral reform in Canada (2004: 42), "changing the electoral system to encourage a broader diversity of voices [in Parliament] could be an important way of giving youth issues a greater presence in democratic governance." One of the rationales for this assertion was the belief that young voters are disproportionately attracted to newer parties— like the Greens—that are systematically disadvantaged by the current first-past-the-post electoral system.

Interest in electoral reform manifested itself at both the federal and provincial level in Canada in the early part of the 21st century. Federally, the Law Commission of Canada (LCC), an independent federal agency that advised Parliament on how to improve and modernize Canada's laws,[3] submitted a report to the Minister of Justice in early 2004 urging the adoption of a Mixed Member Proportional electoral system in the country, similar to the one in use for the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments. Under the proposal, voters would cast two ballots, one for their preferred candidate in a constituency, and the other for a provincial or regional party list. Two-thirds of the Members of Parliament would be elected in constituencies, while the remaining one-third would be drawn from the party lists. A party's share of the seats in Parliament would be roughly proportional to its share of the votes. Although the report did "create waves in Ottawa political circles and [drew] increasing media attention to the issue" of electoral reform, in the estimation of the executive director of Fair Vote Canada (Gordon 2004:

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[3] Stephen Harper's Conservative government eliminated funding to the Law Commission of Canada in September 2006.

296), it failed to secure a sympathetic hearing from the Liberal government. The report was also overshadowed by the furore surrounding the Sponsorship Scandal and eventually eclipsed by the federal election that was called on May 23rd of that year and held just over a month later.

At virtually the same time that the Law Commission was conducting its public consultations on democratic reform, a number of provincial governments also began to investigate ways of improving the responsiveness of representative institutions in their jurisdictions. British Columbia is the province that has traveled furthest down the road toward meaningful reform of the existing electoral system. In 2003, the Liberal government of Gordon Campbell in British Columbia—which at the time held 77 of the 79 seats in the legislature —opted for a populist approach to the thorny issue of electoral system change. Promising a "New Era" of democratic politics in the province, the government created a Citizens' Assembly to review the existing electoral system and make recommendations for reform, if it believed this to be necessary. The Citizens' Assembly was selected from individuals on the provincial voters' list; 20 names from each of the province's 79 electoral districts were drawn randomly; and the voters' list was stratified by age and gender to "ensure equal numbers of men's and women's names and reflection of the provincial age distribution 18 years and over" in the larger pool of potential candidates. The 20 citizens selected in each riding were then invited to express their interest in serving on the assembly. Final selection of the two members per riding took place in early 2004 "at local selection meetings from those still interested at the end of this self-screening process" (Ruff 2003: 7; cf. Gibson 2002: 9-17). In addition to the 159 randomly selected citizens in the Assembly, there was a non-voting chair, Jack Blaney, a former president of Simon Fraser University.

The structure of the Citizens' Assembly reflected a strong desire on the part of the British Columbia government, of advocacy groups like Fair Vote Canada, and of key individuals involved in pushing for electoral reform (such as Gordon Gibson, former leader of the provincial Liberal Party in the province) to take politicians out of the process of change. The Constitution of the Citizens' Assembly, drawn up by Gordon Gibson and ratified (with slight modifications) by the provincial legislature in the spring of 2003, specifically excluded the following individuals from serving on the Citizens' Assembly: members or officers of the Canadian Parliament, Legislative Assembly, or local government bodies; candidates in the previous two federal, provincial, municipal, or regional elections and their official representatives; current provincial party officials; and elected First Nations chiefs and band councillors.

The Citizens' Assembly had a total budget of $5.5 million to conduct its business. In the first phase in the spring of 2004, it gathered information on the various electoral systems in use throughout the world, and experts from other countries were invited to explain the operation of different systems. At the end of this initial "education" period, the Assembly acted as a kind of citizens' jury, hearing the "champions" of various electoral systems and recommending a smaller number (three or four options) for consideration in public hearings. An information householder bulletin, outlining these different options along with their strengths and weaknesses, was mailed out to all voters in the province in April 2004. In May and June 2004, public hearings were held in different parts of the province, and in November 2004 the

Assembly made its final recommendation: that the province adopt the single-transferable vote (BC-STV), a system similar to the one used in the republics of Ireland and Malta. This option was put to a province-wide referendum held concurrently with the provincial election in May 2005; the ballot question was a simple "Yes" or "No" on support for the proposed new system. In order for the referendum to pass, a "supermajority" was required: 60% of voters had to approve, and at least 50% of voters in 60% of the province's ridings had to vote "yes." While the referendum easily met the second threshold, it barely missed the first. After being re-elected with much less than 50% of the votes, the Liberal government acknowledged that the close result on electoral reform warranted holding another referendum in November 2008, with an identical requirement for a supermajority.[4] The government later changed the referendum date to May 2009, to coincide with the next provincial election (Canada, Library of Parliament 2007: 2).

In March 2003, the Quebec government's Estates-General on the Reform of Democratic Institutions (better known as the Béland Commission, after the name of its chairperson, Claude Béland) issued a report in which the democratic deficit was highlighted as a prominent theme. Over the course of its public consultations, the Béland Commission encountered numerous citizens who complained that existing democratic institutions seem to lack real power, that decision-making authority is centralized in the hands of the political executive (and in Canada that means party leaders and their entourages), that excessive party discipline emasculates elected representatives, and that women, ethnic minorities and Aboriginals continue to be under-represented in the legislature and other government bodies (Québec, Comité directeur des États-généraux sur la réforme des institutions démocratiques, 2003: 22-23). The Commission made a number of far-reaching recommendations to improve democratic performance in the province, among them the adoption of a new electoral system based on regional proportional representation, fixed dates for elections, a law permitting citizen initiatives, and direct election of the head of government.

After the release of the Béland Commission report, the subsequent history of electoral reform initiatives in Quebec was torturous and inconclusive. The Liberal Party of Québec, led by Jean Charest, defeated the Parti Québécois in the provincial election held on April 14, 2003. In December 2004, the Minister Responsible for the Reform of Democratic Institutions, Jacques Dupuis, introduced a draft law in the National Assembly outlining a proposed mixed member proportional electoral system for the province. Under the proposed system, the number of seats in the National Assembly would be increased from 125 to 127. Seventy-seven MNAs would be elected in constituencies using existing single-member simple plurality voting rules. The remaining 50 MNAs would be selected from party lists in 24 to 27 electoral districts. By far the most controversial feature of the proposal was the provision for a single ballot to elect *both* riding MNAs and list MNAs, instead of the two ballots—one for the constituency, the other for

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[4] See the discussion of the B.C. experiment in direct democracy in Tanguay (2007).

a party list—that are employed in most other MMP systems.[5] In addition, the small size of the electoral districts—usually five seats in total, three of which were to be regular constituencies along with two compensatory list MNAs—would pose a rather large hurdle to newer parties seeking entry into the legislature. Thus critics of the proposal complained that it would tend to "freeze" the existing three-party system in the province.

This draft bill was submitted to a select committee of the National Assembly in June 2005 for detailed investigation. The committee's work was assisted by an eight-member Citizens' Assembly, which eventually rejected the government proposal and in April 2006 offered its own alternative, which would have allowed voters to cast two ballots, one for a constituency member and another for a party list.[6] The draft bill languished in committee and actual legislation to reform the province's voting system was not introduced before the provincial election of March 26, 2007. Since that time, the issue of electoral reform in Quebec has been "in limbo"; none of the three parties represented in the National Assembly is an enthusiastic proponent of greater proportionality, each for its own reasons (Cliche 2007). The PQ fears that MMP would likely doom the sovereignty project, while the Liberals —despite their ritual genuflections before the idea of democratic reform—are quite content with the existing rules of the game. And the ADQ, having grown from a tiny caucus of one (leader Mario Dumont) to the Official Opposition in the space of a decade, is convinced that majority status under first-past-the-post is within its grasp.

In addition to BC and Quebec, two other provinces initiated substantive discussions about the desirability of electoral reform in the first years of this decade. The government of Pat Binns in Prince Edward Island set up a one-man Commission on Electoral Reform under the Honourable Norman Carruthers, which issued its final report in December 2003. Carruthers recommended the adoption of a German-style Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) electoral system, in which two-thirds (21) of the members of the provincial assembly would be elected in constituencies by means of the existing simple plurality electoral system, and the remaining one-third (10) would be drawn from party lists, based on party shares of the provincial vote (Prince Edward Island, Commissioner of Electoral Reform, 2003: ch. 9). A five-person Commission on Prince Edward Island's Electoral Future was created in February 2005, with a mandate to craft a concise plebiscite question on electoral reform and to conduct a public education campaign on the issue. On November 28, 2005, a crushing majority of voters—63 percent of those who cast ballots[7]—opted to retain the existing first-past-the post system. Some observers have noted

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[5] The proposal (Massicotte 2004) can be downloaded from the website of the Secrétariat à la réforme des institutions démocratiques et à l'accès à l'information: http://www.institutions-democratiques.gouv.qc.ca/reforme-des-institutions/mode_scrutin.htm.

[6] The complicated chronology of the Quebec electoral reform proposals is traced in Canada, Library of Parliament (2007: 11-12).

[7] Elections PEI notes that no official count of electors was available for the plebiscite, since no enumeration was conducted. "An *approximate* idea of voter turnout can be calculated using the 2003 Provincial General Election figure of 97,180 eligible electors" (Elections PEI 2005). A total of 32,265 voters cast ballots in the plebiscite, putting the unofficial turnout at a meager 33.2 percent.

that this seemingly decisive result might not represent the final word on electoral reform in the province, since advocates of MMP can plausibly argue that "a lack of public education and a lack of funding for Elections PEI resulted in … relatively low voter turnout" in a province renowned for high turnout (Canada, Library of Parliament 2007: 9).

Finally, in New Brunswick, Premier Bernard Lord fulfilled one of his election promises by establishing in December 2003 a Commission on Legislative Democracy, whose mandate was to "examine and make recommendations on strengthening and modernizing New Brunswick's electoral system and democratic institutions and practices to make them more fair, open, accountable and accessible to New Brunswickers" (New Brunswick 2003). The Commission submitted its final report and recommendations to Premier Lord on December 31, 2004. It proposed the creation of a regional, mixed-member proportional electoral system in which 36 members of the legislature would be elected in single-member constituencies by a simple plurality and 20 would be selected from closed party lists in four regional districts of approximately equal size. Voters would cast two ballots, one for their preferred candidate in a constituency and the other for a party. Parties would need to obtain at least 5 percent of the provincial vote in order to be eligible to win any list seats. It also recommended that a binding referendum be held no later than at the same time as the next provincial election in order to allow voters to accept or reject the Commission's proposal (New Brunswick, Commission on Legislative Democracy 2004: 17-18). In June 2006, the government of Bernard Lord responded to the Commission report by pledging to hold a referendum on the electoral reform proposal on May 12, 2008 (Canada, Library of Parliament 2007: 5). Lord's razor-thin (one-seat) majority in the legislature evaporated over the summer, however, and an election was called for September 18, 2006. Shawn Graham's Liberal Party won a narrow majority of three seats in the election, but ironically came in second behind the Progressive Conservatives in the popular vote, thereby underscoring one of the distorting effects of a first-past-the-post system. The Liberal government issued its own response to the Committee on Legislative Democracy report on June 28, 2007, in which it pledged, among other things, to implement fixed election dates, allow for the use of more advance polls, online registration and other measures to increase voter turnout, and establish a compulsory civics program for New Brunswick youth. On the subject of electoral reform, the government promised only to conduct a "thorough review" of existing initiatives in other provinces with a view to improving the functioning of New Brunswick's system of voting. The government explicitly rejected the recommendation to hold a referendum on proportional representation (New Brunswick, Executive Council Office 2007).

This brief overview of the electoral reform initiatives in four provinces underscores the fact that in each case, the defects in the first-past-the-post system were readily apparent to pundits, voters and political activists alike. Elections in both Quebec and British Columbia during the 1990s had produced "wrong winners"—when the party that came in second in the popular vote actually won a majority of seats in the legislature. In New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, the opposition was at times so heavily penalized by the operation of FPTP that it was effectively "eviscerated" and could not play its proper role in the political system (Carty 2006: 22). There were compelling reasons to believe that these flaws in the first-past-the-post system were

contributing to voter angst and dissatisfaction with the apparent lack of fairness in the status quo. In the next section of the paper, we argue that this was not exactly the case in Ontario.

Democratic Renewal and Electoral Reform in Ontario

On the face of it, Ontario seemed to be an unlikely candidate for a government-sponsored electoral reform initiative in the early years of the 21st century. The province's voters have a well-earned reputation for spurning ideological extremes, for embracing the cautious pragmatism of leaders like Bill Davis, for being satisfied with, even complacent about the political status quo. These are caricatures, of course, and they were put to the test during the contentious and animated decade of the 1990s. If any era in Ontario's political history ought to have exposed the flaws in the existing first-past-the-post electoral system, this was it. First, the NDP government of Bob Rae was elected in 1990 thanks to the electoral magic of first-past-the-post, which transformed just under 38 percent of the popular vote into a solid legislative majority. Secondly, Mike Harris and the Progressive Conservatives inaugurated the "Common Sense Revolution" in 1995—which aimed to demolish much of the legislative and policy legacies of the NDP who had preceded them in power—thanks to an overwhelming majority built on slightly less than 45 percent of the popular vote. This kind of "policy lurch" is often singled out as one of the chief drawbacks of a majoritarian electoral system like first-past-the-post. [8] Third, voter turnout in Ontario, never very high—it averaged in the mid-60s between 1948 and 1987—declined steadily after 1990, to a then postwar low of 58 percent in 1999 (see Figure 2).

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Despite these symptoms of an electoral system under stress, proposals for reform garnered little attention or support among either party elites or the electorate before 2000. As Dennis Pilon (2004: 250) notes, "[u]ntil recently, none of the three main legislative parties ... expressed much interest in the topic [of PR], dismissing it as the concern of 'losers' and 'cranks' or simply ignoring it altogether." This was as true of the NDP as it was of the two mainstream parties (the Liberals and Progressive Conservatives). Indeed, Bob Rae's government did absolutely nothing to advance the discussion of electoral reform while it was in power. It was only after its stinging defeat in the 1995 provincial election at the hands of Mike Harris's Progressive Conservatives that the Ontario NDP began to take a more systematic interest in electoral reform. A special party task force endorsed German-style MMP in early 2002 (Pilon 2004: 253).

Dalton McGuinty's Liberal Party also embraced the idea of electoral reform at the turn of the 21st century as part of its re-branding strategy to unseat Mike Harris and the Progressive

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[8] Pilon (2004: 255) points out that on the surface, Ontario's first-past-the-post electoral system seemed to be delivering precisely what its defenders claimed to be one of its principal virtues: alternation in power of majority governments with distinct policy prescriptions. Yet he also argues, quite justifiably, that "these results also served to highlight how arbitrary and unrepresentative plurality results could be, as government lurched from moderate PC, to a Liberal/NDP coalition, to a Liberal majority, to a surprising NDP majority, and finally back to the PCs (and a much more right-wing variant this time) ...."

Conservatives (Harris would not resign as Premier until April 2002). The party held a policy convention—the "Niagara Conference," whose main theme was "Ideas for Renewal"—in May 2001, at which members joined with academics and other experts to discuss, among other things, ways of invigorating the political system in the province. This eventually led to the adoption of a "Democratic Charter" in November 2001. A key element of this Charter was the pledge to foster a public debate about the strengths and weaknesses of Ontario's voting system, and possibly to hold a referendum on replacing it with an alternative model. It is important to note that the Liberals' Democratic Charter, which formed an essential part of the party's electoral program during the 2003 provincial election, studiously avoided any evaluation of the various electoral systems on offer; it simply committed the party to a public discussion of these alternatives. The Liberal Party of Ontario was itself officially agnostic on the merits of proportional versus majoritarian electoral systems, even if key individuals like future Attorney-General and Minister Responsible for Democratic Renewal, Michael Bryant, appeared favourable to PR (Pilon 2004: 254).

Once elected, the government of Dalton McGuinty established a Democratic Renewal Secretariat in October 2003 to fulfill its campaign pledge. Michael Bryant, the Attorney-General and the Minister Responsible for Democratic Renewal, announced plans "to reach out to Ontarians and engage them in the most ambitious democratic renewal process in Ontario history, including fixed election dates, new ways to engage young people and innovative tools that could include Internet and telephone voting" (Ontario, Ministry of the Attorney General/Democratic Renewal Secretariat, 2003). Among the initiatives undertaken by the Minister Responsible for Democratic Renewal was the establishment of fixed dates for provincial elections—the first Thursday in October, every four years, starting in 2007—in order to remove the strategic advantage previously enjoyed by the governing party and therefore "level the playing field" for all political parties. Introducing the *Election Statute Law Amendment Act* in June 2004, Premier McGuinty noted that convention conferred on the government the power to "call an election when it feels it can win. It serves no one but the governing party. It's a perk of being in power. And it ignores the most important members of any democracy—its citizens" (Ontario, Office of the Premier 2004). The Liberal government also introduced changes to make voting more convenient, by increasing the number of advance polling days from 6 to 13 and modernizing the ballot paper by including party labels for the first time. In addition, the government moved to regulate third-party (or interest group) election advertising and introduced "real-time disclosure" of donations to parties and leadership candidates.[9]

On November 18, 2004, the McGuinty government announced its intention to create a citizens' assembly to examine the province's first-past-the-post electoral system and recommend possible changes to it. In the event that the assembly were to recommend an alternative electoral system, the government pledged to hold a referendum on the issue during their

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[9] All contributions to parties or leadership candidates over $100 must now be reported to Elections Ontario within 10 business days of being deposited. This information is available on Election Ontario's website. Failure to report these contributions leaves a party liable to a fine of up to $5000. A list of initiatives sponsored by the Democratic Renewal Secretariat can be found on its website: http://www.democraticrenewal.gov.on.ca/english/.

mandate. This was the keystone of the "most ambitious democratic renewal effort in North America," according to Michael Bryant, the Minister Responsible for Democratic Reform (Ontario, Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform 2007: 198). Ontario Regulation 82/06, adopted on February 3, 2006, established the terms of reference of the Citizens' Assembly, the rules for selecting its members, and its basic operating procedures. On March 27, 2006, George Thomson, a former provincial court judge and deputy minister in both the Ontario and federal governments, was appointed chair of the OCA (Ontario, Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform 2007a: 201-06; Rose 2007: 9).

The Citizens' Assembly consisted of 103 randomly selected individuals, one from each of the provincial constituencies, and the appointed chair brought the total to 104. Elections Ontario sent 120,000 letters to voters on the Register of Electors, asking individuals if they would consent to being considered for membership in the OCA. Slightly more than 7,000 citizens agreed, and of these 1,253 were invited to attend one of twenty-nine selection meetings held in various parts of the province. The actual members were selected by means of a random draw. Fifty-two of the members were female, fifty-one were male. The age distribution of the Citizens' Assembly reflected that of the province as a whole (Rose 2007: 9-10).

In the fall of 2006, the Citizens' Assembly spent six weekends learning about the various electoral systems in use around the world. Academic experts were brought in to discuss the complexities of the various systems, and a series of simulations were used throughout the process in order to encourage OCA members to "learn by doing" (Rose 2007: 11). Throughout this learning phase, the OCA members were assisted by the Citizens' Assembly Secretariat and by Jonathan Rose, the Academic Director. From late October 2006 to January 2007, the Citizens' Assembly engaged in public consultations on electoral reform, soliciting written submissions from citizens and holding meetings throughout the province (Ontario, Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform 2006: 2). Finally, starting in February 2007, the OCA entered its deliberation phase, during which members debated the relative strengths and weaknesses of the existing FPTP system and those of two alternatives, STV and MMP. Eventually, a vote on the best alternative system was held, resulting in a fairly decisive victory for MMP, which received support from 75 members, as opposed to 25 for STV. The deliberation phase culminated in a vote on whether the province should retain its existing electoral system or adopt MMP; 86 members voted in favour of MMP, while 16 supported FPTP (Ontario, Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform 2007a: 125, 128).

The Mixed Member Proportional system advocated by the Citizens' Assembly included the following features[10]:

- Voters would have two votes, one for a candidate in a riding and a second for a party;
- The provincial legislature would be increased in size, from 103 members to 129;

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[10] Summarized in Ontario, Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform 2007b.

- 90 of the seats in the legislature would be determined by simple plurality voting in single-member constituencies, as is currently the case;
- The remaining 39 members (just over 30 percent of the total) would be elected on the basis of the party portion of the ballot;
- A party's share of the seats in the legislature would be determined by its share of the vote on the party portion of the ballot; the *Hare Quota*, a largest remainder system, would be used as the basis for the calculation;
- The list seats would be compensatory, such that any party's share of the seats in the legislature would be roughly equivalent to its share of the province-wide vote on the second portion of the ballot;
- Any party obtaining at least 3 percent of the provincial vote would be eligible for list seats;
- Party lists would be closed, and prior to the election, parties would have to publish their lists (through Elections Ontario) and the process they used to create them; this would allow voters "to see whether parties created their lists in a fair and transparent way" (Ontario, Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform 2007b: 8);
- There would be no prohibition on dual candidacy—that is, a candidate could appear on a party list *and* run for election in a constituency (Ontario, Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform 2007b: 153).

On June 20, 2007, the Democratic Renewal Secretariat announced the wording of the referendum question that would be put to the voters in a separate ballot to be held concurrently with the provincial election in October:

> Which electoral system should Ontario use to elect members to the provincial legislature?/Quel système électoral l'Ontario devrait-il utiliser pour élire les députés provinciaux à l'Assemblée législative?
>
> The existing electoral system (First-Past-the-Post)/L'actuel système électoral (système de la majorité relative)
>
> The alternative electoral system proposed by the Citizens' Assembly (Mixed Member Proportional)/L'autre système électoral proposé par l'Assemblée des citoyens (système de représentation proportionnelle mixte) (Ontario, Democratic Renewal Secretariat 2007).

Some groups, like Fair Vote Canada, were caught by surprise by the question wording; they had been expecting a straightforward "Yes" or "No" option for voters. Electoral reform activists were also disappointed at the lack of publicity for the work of the Citizens' Assembly, whose final report was not easily available in all parts of the province.[11] The budget for public

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[11] One of the authors of this paper (Tanguay) was involved in the referendum campaign as co-chair of the Waterloo chapter of Fair Vote Canada.

education during the referendum campaign was set at $6.8 million (Chung 2007), part of which was devoted to setting up a website—yourbigdecision.ca—to inform voters.

The referendum legislation determined that the result would be binding if the MMP option received at least 60 percent of the vote province-wide and a majority votes in 60 percent of the ridings (64 out of 107). On October 10, 2007, 63.1 percent of the 4.3 million voters who cast ballots supported the existing electoral system, and only 36.9 percent opted for MMP. MMP gained majority support in only 5 of the 107 ridings in the province, all of them in Toronto: Beaches-East York (50.1%), Davenport (56.7%), Parkdale-High Park (54.5%), Toronto Danforth (55.1%) and Trinity-Spadina (59.2%).

Analysis: The Vote Decision

In this section, we consider several reasons that might explain this negative referendum result. Specifically, we evaluate three aspects of citizen support for the proposed electoral reform change. First, we consider the degree of public support for democratic renewal, and analyze its influence on the referendum vote. Next, we look at partisan influences on voting for or against the reform. Finally, we consider the role that information about the proposed electoral system played in the outcome.

Public Support for Democratic Reform

When Dalton McGuinty announced plans to organize the Citizens' Assembly for Electoral Reform, he noted,
> I've heard it said that some Ontarians are cynical about our political institutions. But I'm reminded of the old expression that every cynic is at heart a disappointed idealist. I believe that. I believe that at our core we are idealists. We want government to work. We want our province to work, to succeed, to be the place to be, for years to come. So I don't mind a little skepticism. To me, it means that our citizens have high expectations for their government and for themselves.
> (http://www.premier.gov.on.ca/news/Product.asp?ProductID=254)

The impetus for this step toward democratic reform (or renewal), as well as the move toward fixed election dates and new election financing laws, was the perceived cynicism and apathy of the Ontario electorate.

Given this rationale for calling the referendum, an obvious initial question to investigate with our data is whether Ontarians really are cynical of government and in favour of democratic reforms. We first considered whether or not Ontarians expressed cynicism related to their government. We looked at questions designed to evaluate one's level of support for government, both diffuse and specific. As you can see in Table 1, a majority of Ontarians respond that they do not trust government (67%), that government wastes taxpayer money (93%), and that government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves (54%). A majority of citizens also think that the government does not care what they think (59%) and that elected officials soon lose touch with the electorate (74%). In contrast to this, however,

the results also indicate that 74% of Ontarians are satisfied with the way democracy works in Ontario. Thus, the data indicate that cynicism toward government does exist, but that it has not translated into general dissatisfaction with democracy. One possible reason for this could be that the support for government questions did not specify the *Ontario* government, while the satisfaction with democracy question did; perhaps Ontarians are cynical and apathetic about government in general (or the federal government), but not the Ontario government specifically. Nonetheless, these results do not provide strong support for McGuinty's claim that Ontarians are cynical about political institutions.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Another way of evaluating preferences for democratic reform is to consider attitudes about the fairness and proportionality of the Ontario electoral system. Strong opinions about fairness in the electoral system, and the need for proportionality in terms of seats and votes, should increase support for changing to a Mixed Member Proportional electoral system, as MMP is designed to improve upon FPP specifically in these areas. We asked several questions on this topic in the survey (see Table 2). First, we asked a simple question about what percentage of seats a party should get if it wins 40% of the popular vote. Just over 50% of Ontarians responded that the party should get 40% of the seats and not more (the other options were between 40 and half, and over half to facilitate governing). Another question asked whether it was acceptable for the majority of seats to go to a party that did not win a majority of votes, as happens under the existing first-past-the-post (FPP) system. For this question, only 43.5% indicated that they felt it was unacceptable for a party to win a majority of seats without a majority of votes. Almost 30% of respondents indicated that it was acceptable, while 27% were uncertain. Finally, we also asked whether a majority or minority government was better, again keeping in mind that minority governments are a likely outcome of MMP elections. For this question, 44% preferred majority government to 29% who preferred minority government. A full 23% thought there was no difference between the two types. Despite the cynicism indicated in the questions analyzed above, the questions specific to electoral system change do not provide strong indications that Ontarians were in favour of improving the fairness or proportionality of their electoral system. That a majority of citizens prefer fairness and proportionality in the electoral system is clear, but the numbers do not indicate overwhelming support in any respect – a bare majority indicated the percentage of seats won should correspond to the percentage of the popular vote; less than a majority felt FPP outcomes were unacceptable; more Ontarians prefer majority governments than minority governments. Thus, what emerges from this analysis of responses is a picture of Ontarians as cynical yet relatively satisfied voters. There is no evidence that the cynicism expressed by Ontarians has translated into strong demand for electoral reform.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

The above descriptive statistics present a picture of the attitudes of the Ontario electorate, but they do not indicate how did these attitudes affecting voting for the electoral reform referendum in 2007. To understand the influence of attitudes about fairness and

proportionality on the referendum vote, we analyzed a logit regression model. To best estimate the model, we compiled the various cynicism measures into a single scale (α=0.76). Given that satisfaction with democracy did not correspond to the cynicism results, we include it as a separate independent variable. We included dummy variables to indicate attitudes about fairness (majority of seats without majority of votes unacceptable) and proportionality (40% of the vote should equal 40% of the seats), and a preference for minority government, which all should have led to increased support for changing the electoral system. For control variables, we include age, university education and income, all of which were found to have a significant relationship with the dependent variable in other statistical tests (results not shown).

The results are shown in Table 3 below. The cynicism scale is a significant influence on voting in favour of changing to MMP, but in the opposite direction to expectations. The more cynical an Ontarian was, the less likely he/she was to support the change to MMP. Perhaps, in this case, general apathy and cynicism toward the government carried over to attitudes about reform in Ontario, too, in that the possibility of more parties emerging under an MMP system was undesirable. This finding might also reflect some of the campaign strategy on the "No" side, which emphasized increasing the size of the legislature and party control of the closed lists (Cutler and Fournier 2007). John Tory, the PC leader, was quoted as saying that he would vote against MMP "because I don't think we need more politicians, because I don't think we need appointed politicians and because I think we should get on with parliamentary reform first" (The Toronto Star, October 9, 2007, thestar.com).

[Insert Table 3 about here]

The other results are less surprising. As expected, those who were unhappy with the disproportionate seat distribution outcomes under FPP were in favour of electoral reform and those who thought minority governments were better were more likely to vote in favour of changing to MMP. One's preference for proportionality, however, was not a significant predictor of vote choice, although the direction of the effect is as expected. Overall, the model is not very powerful. Only 15% of the variance in referendum voting is explained by the model, which includes the variables most related to one' s preferences for democratic change, and in particular, electoral reform.

Partisan Influences

If the referendum votes of Ontarians were not strongly directed by their feelings toward government and the electoral system, what did guide their votes? Vowles, Karp and Banducci (2000) found that partisan self-interest plays a role in support for MMP in New Zealand. There is also a large literature that suggests that uninformed voters can utilize information shortcuts, or heuristics, in situations where they are required to state an opinion (Downs 1957; Popkin 1991; Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991). In the case of the referendum, if a voter did not have a lot of knowledge about the issue, was unsure of what information to believe, or simply did not know how to judge the competing information, but was casting a ballot nonetheless, it is possible that they may have turned to partisan considerations to guide their own opinion

formation. Clarke et al. (2004) find that this occurred in the 1995 Quebec sovereignty referendum. They argue that the amount of information in that election was overwhelming and difficult to sort through to determine the "real" consequences of a "yes" vote. Thus, voters turned to the cues provided by parties and public figures to determine how to cast their own ballots. In the 2007 Ontario referendum, the situation might have been similar, as conflicting information about the consequences of MMP were publicized by interested groups, such as Vote for MMP and NoMMP. We investigate this possibility below.

First, consider how the support for MMP differed by partisanship (Table 4). There is a clear difference among major and minor party identifiers in their level of support for the change to MMP, although no partisan group was over 50% in favour. The Liberal and PC partisans supported the proposal 25% and 26%, respectively, while NDP and Green partisans supported the change at much higher levels—48% and 50%, respectively. Clearly, minor party supporters were more aware of the potential benefits that such an electoral change could mean for their party. However, it is surprising that support from NDP and Green partisans is not higher; at least half of each party's supporters were opposed to the reform.

[Insert Table 4 about here]

Despite these clear differences in how the reform was perceived by partisans, none of the parties made electoral reform a major issue of their campaign. Both Howard Hampton (NDP) and Frank de Jong (Green) came out publicly in favour of the reform, while John Tory (PC) stated that he would vote against the proposal. The PC Party, although it did not have an official position, is reported to have sent an email to its supporters urging them to reject the change (The Toronto Star, October 9, 2007, thestar.com). Premier Dalton McGuinty (Liberal) refused to comment on his preference, although two of his cabinet ministers, George Smitherman and Michael Bryant, were publicly in favour of the change. Officially, the Liberal party maintained a neutral stance on the issue. In terms of acting as cues for voters, then, the major parties were poorly positioned. The influence of all of the parties, however, was likely diminished due to the issue's low prominence during the campaign.

This lack of publicity is evident in that more than more than 60% of Ontarians did not know the stances of each of the parties (see Table 5). Even partisans were largely unsure of the positions of their own parties – between 50% and 63% of partisans answered that they did not know whether their party supported the reform. The lowest number of uncertain partisans came from the NDP, but still half of those who claimed NDP partisanship did not know that their party supported the change. Of those who did provide an answer, however, it is clear that supporters of the two minor parties (NDP and Green) were clearest about their party's stances (this is no surprising given that both parties were officially in favour). PC partisans were less clear, but the numbers indicate some understanding of John Tory's position – almost twice as many (28%) answered that the party opposed the change as compared to those who thought the party was in favour (16%). The Liberal Party, however, did the worst job of communicating how its interests would be served by the referendum. Its partisans were almost evenly split between those who thought the Party supported the change and those who thought the Party

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opposed the change. Clearly, then, at least the Liberal Party did little to cue its supporters as to what kind of vote would best serve its interests.

[Insert Table 5 about here]

Given that so many Ontarians were unsure of where the parties stood on the issue of electoral reform, did partisanship and/or perceptions of their party's position influence the vote? We ran a logit regression including the same control variables as used above and a set of dummy variables to indicate partisanship and perceptions of party positions. We also included interactions between partisanship and the perceived (correct) position of each party, as it should be partisans that respond to the issue by considering the cues (or best interests) of their party.[12] The results are reported in Table 6. What is interesting to note is that partisanship does not exert any independent effect on the referendum vote. In conjunction with party stances, however, there is an effect for voters who were either Liberal or PC supporters and perceived their party to oppose the issue. There is no effect for the interaction of NDP or Green voters and perceptions that the parties supported the change. These results add another dimension to the analysis reported above – even though NDP and Green supporters were clearer about the actual position of their parties on the issue, it was less of an influence on the vote than the partisan-perception interactions for the parties that were less clear about their stances (especially the Liberals). Thus, it appears in the case of Liberal and PC supporters that voters did consider the stances of the party when casting their ballot, and given that these parties are the major parties (and have the most partisans) this may explain part of the initiative's failure. As with the model of reform attitudes above, however, this model explains very little of the variance in the vote, less than 13%.

[Insert Table 6 about here]

Information about MMP

One of the main issues raised during the referendum campaign was that people were just uninformed about the choice they were being asked to make. Quoted in *The Globe and Mail*, Denis Pilon went so far as to call the referendum "an unmitigated disaster." He was also quoted as saying, ""I don't think ever so much money has been wasted in educating people so poorly."
(http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20071010.wont_referendum1010/BNStory/ontarioelection2007/home?cid=al_gam_mostemail) In this section, we investigate whether the level of information had an effect on support for the change to MMP. Cutler and Johnston (forthcoming) found that knowledge about the Citizens' Assembly and proposed electoral system made a significant difference for attitudes toward the proposed electoral change in British Columbia. Furthermore, Cutler and Fournier (2007) reported, using different

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[12] We classify the Liberal Party as opposing the electoral change given the potential loss of power that the party would experience, as well as McGuinty's perceived position.

data and statistical simulations, that information made a fundamental difference in support for the referendum in Ontario. Are these results replicated with our data?

In the survey, we asked people whether they were familiar with the MMP electoral system. More than half (65%) reported that they were very or somewhat familiar with the electoral system, compared to 22% who were not very or not at all familiar, and just over 2% who had never heard of the proposed electoral system (see Table 7). These numbers suggest that more Ontarians felt that they were informed than the media portrayed, although it is difficult to determine who felt "informed enough" to cast their ballot from this one question.

[Insert Table 7 about here]

Just who were these "informed" individuals? To answer this question, we looked at the correlations between being informed about MMP (very or somewhat) and several demographic variables (Table 8). Not surprisingly, those who were older, university educated, had a higher income, and were more interested in the election and politics (compared to the average Ontarian) were all significantly more likely to be informed about the system ($p<=0.01$). Of partisans, Liberal and PCs were also more likely to report being information about MMP than NDP or Green supporters ($p<0.08$).

[Insert Table 8 about here]

To further analyze the factors that contributed to one being informed about the proposed electoral system, we ran an OLS regression with the level of information about MMP as the (5-point) dependent variable. Reported in Table 9, all of the variables emerge as significant influences except for age. The weight of the variables differ, however, in that a university education and interest in politics (in general) are both more substantial influences. Even with such a simple model, over 20% of the variance is accounted for; thus, the distribution of information about the referendum proposal can be partially explained by simple demographics and interest in the election and politics.

[Insert Table 9 about here]

Now that we know the levels of information about MMP varied throughout the electorate, and along typical demographic lines, the next question to answer is whether one's level of information had an effect on voting in the referendum.   First, we consider the distribution of responses about fairness and proportionality and minority governments among those of high and low levels of information.[13] As you can see in Table 10, there is a significant difference in the opinions about fairness and proportionality and minority governments between the low and high information groups. Those who felt more informed about MMP were more likely to express attitudes in line with preferences for electoral change (more concerned about

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[13] The MMP Information variable was divided at its mean (3.7) to create the low and high information categories.

proportionality, more likely to feel FPP unacceptable, more supportive of minority governments). Interestingly, however, the proportion of informed individuals who felt the first past the post system was acceptable was also much higher than in the low MMP information group (37% to 16%).

[Insert Table 10 about here]

As our final test of the impact of information on the referendum vote, we ran the same model three times – with the whole sample, with only low information respondents, and with high information respondents. We included in the model both attitudes about government and the electoral system (from Table 3) and the partisan variables from Table 6. The results are shown in Table 11. Those with more information about MMP were more influenced by cynicism, the belief that a FPP outcome is unacceptable, and preference for minority governments. One's satisfaction with democracy is also significant if he/she has more information about MMP, although in an unexpected direction - perhaps the openness of the government to democratic reforms was encouraging for those who were satisfied with the Ontario democracy.   Only feeling that FPP has unacceptable outcomes is also significant for those with low information, but the magnitude of the influence is almost two-thirds less (comparing the odds ratios). Those who identified with the NDP, or who thought that the NDP was in favour of the proposal, were also more likely to be in favour of the electoral change in the low information sample, while those with more information about MMP were influenced by Liberal and PC partisanship interacted with beliefs that those parties were against the reform. Last, it is notable that the model explains much more of the vote decision for those with higher information (Pseudo-R2 is 0.25 compared to 0.18 for low information).

[Insert Table 11 about here]

Interpreting these results, it is clear that those who felt more informed about MMP were more likely to weight their concerns about government and the electoral system when deciding how to vote. They were also more likely to look to their party for cues as to how they should behave. While the number of individuals reporting that they felt informed about MMP suggests that the media might have been wrong about the amount of information circulated prior to the referendum, it is clear that having information about the electoral system significantly changed the factors that went into the vote decision. This result is consistent with that of Cutler and Fournier (2007). To further illustrate the effect of information, we calculated the predicted vote for MMP in several different scenarios.   Using the full model, the predicted vote in favour of changing the electoral system is 30%. In the low information sample, the model also predicts a vote 30% in favour, whereas in the high information sample the predicted vote is 39%. These results indicate that those who felt they were more informed about the proposed electoral system were more likely to support the change, as well as be differentially influenced by their attitudes toward the government, democracy and the electoral system. We can also simulate what the vote result may have been if information about the MMP system had been more widespread. If everyone in the sample was equally uninformed about MMP, that is, their information levels were at the minimum value (1), the predicted vote falls to 10%.

Conversely, specifying that everyone is equally well informed (information at the maximum level, 5) leads to a simulated predicted vote of 42%. Thus, it is clear that information about the MMP electoral system was crucial to the referendum outcome. Had the campaign been more informative, the issue publicized more, and the public more attentive or interested, the outcome might have been different. It is important to recognize, however, that despite the changes in the predicted outcome, none of the predictions reaches the 60% threshold that was set for actually changing Ontario's electoral system. Regardless of information, it appears that Ontarians were simply not in favour of changing their electoral system. Perhaps, as the data discussed above showed, Ontarians are just too satisfied with their system the way it is.

Conclusion

Five provinces—BC, Quebec, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Ontario—initiated public discussions on the issue of electoral reform in the early part of the 21st century. This paper has shown that Ontario was something of an "outlier" in this process: unlike BC and Quebec, there was no lengthy history of mobilization by high-profile political actors in support of a more proportional electoral system. None of the three main parties in Ontario had actively supported the notion of electoral reform prior to 2003, and the Liberals under Dalton McGuinty were interested, at most, in launching a public dialogue on electoral system change as a key part of a larger investigation into ways of improving democratic performance in the province. The Liberal Party of Ontario was not a strong supporter of PR; only a few high-profile cabinet ministers, such as Michael Bryant and George Smitherman, voiced support for a new electoral system in the province. Nor had Ontario witnessed a recent electoral triumph by a "wrong winner"—a situation where the party with the second most votes obtained a majority of the legislative seats, thanks to the peculiarities of FPP—as did BC and Quebec. Finally, unlike PEI and New Brunswick, where FPP sometimes worked to deprive the main opposition party of meaningful representation in the legislature, the distortions produced by the system in Ontario were much more modest. For example, when the NDP won a legislative majority (74 of 130 seats) with slightly less than 38 percent of the popular vote in 1990, the official opposition party was still able to secure 36 seats.

In short, the issue of electoral reform in Ontario in the early part of this decade was not highly politicized and there are strong reasons to suspect that calls for a more proportional system resonated more with political elites and some civil society organizations like Fair Vote than they did with the broader public. Our analysis in this paper underscores the relative lack of engagement of Ontario's voters with the idea of electoral reform. Among our most important findings is the somewhat surprising discovery that the most cynical voters in Ontario were more likely to *oppose* MMP. Cynicism and lack of trust in the political class combined to make voters wary of institutional reforms that they felt would increase the role of party officials in political life, by giving them control over the closed lists that would be created under the proposed system of MMP. Although our data did not allow us to investigate it, the proposed increase in the size of the provincial legislature under MMP may well have antagonized the most cynical voters in the province, just as the increase in the size of New Zealand's Parliament when it adopted MMP in the mid-1990s became a target for widespread voter hostility.

It is interesting to compare our findings for Ontario with those of Johnston, Krahn and Harrison (2006) for Alberta. The authors analysed the relationship between political trust and perceptions about the health of democracy in the province, on the one hand, and support for institutional reforms—among them, proportional representation—on the other, drawing on a survey of 1204 Albertan voters. They found that those Albertans "in favour of PR [were] less likely to see democracy in the province as healthy. But the effect is weak …" (Johnston, Krahn and Harrison 2006: 174). They argue that "the formal and abstract nature of reform proposals" such as a more proportional electoral system "is far removed from the thinking of citizens who, in a much more visceral sense, feel alienated from political institutions in general and distrustful of a remote provincial government" (2006: 174-75). We can speculate that something similar was occurring in Ontario at the time of the referendum on electoral reform. A majority of Ontarians seemed quite satisfied with the state of democracy and the health of the political system in the province. For the most alienated and distrustful voters, moreover, the proposed MMP electoral system simply did not respond to their overriding concerns.

We also examined the impact of partisanship on voter behaviour in the referendum on electoral reform. Partisans of the three main parties in the province were largely unsure of the positions on MMP adopted by their own parties: between 50 and 63% of partisans answered that they did not know whether their party supported the reform or not. The lowest level of uncertainty was found among supporters of the NDP, but still half of those who claimed NDP partisanship did not know that their party supported the change. The ambiguity of the positions adopted by both the PCs and the Liberals—official neutrality, combined with either covert (as in the case of Dalton McGuinty) or outright (in the case of John Tory) opposition among party leaders—may well have actually *increased* support for MMP, as Liberal and PC party supporters who perceived their parties to be opposed to MMP were much more likely to vote against the proposal in the referendum. Had the NDP and Green Party mounted more of a campaign in favour of electoral change, the support for electoral change may also have increased.

Finally, our paper examined the role of information, or lack thereof, in determining the referendum vote. We found that a substantial majority (just over 65%) of voters felt that they were either very familiar or somewhat familiar with the MMP system proposed by the Citizens' Assembly—something of a contrast with the media portrayal of the situation at the time. Not surprisingly, it was older, better-educated, wealthier and more interested or attentive voters who felt the best informed. As well, Liberal and PC supporters felt better informed about MMP than either NDP or Green partisans, something that might have hurt the advocates of electoral reform. Our results indicate that information about the proposed electoral system change clearly contributed to support for MMP, but we also showed that even if the referendum campaign had been more informative, the MMP proposal would not likely have obtained the necessary 60 percent support required in order to pass.

In conclusion, our findings in this paper suggest that Ontario's flirtation with electoral reform was largely elite driven and without general public support. Not only did citizens express modest support for such a democratic reform, but the political parties and the information

campaign did little to facilitate a true debate over the electoral system best suited for Ontario. Clearly, Premier McGuinty was keeping his election promise by moving forward with democratic reform initiatives. Electoral change, however, was not a popular target; perhaps democratic renewal would have been better served by focusing resources on a different aspect of the political process.

Figure 1:
Voter Turnout in Federal Elections, 1945-2006
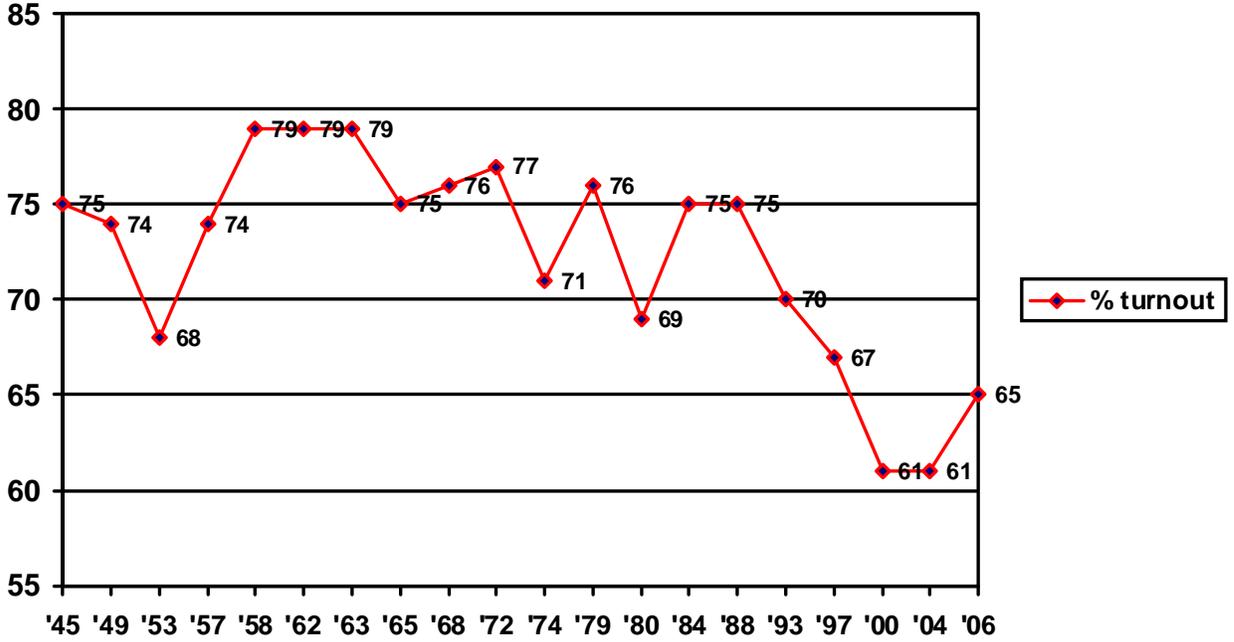
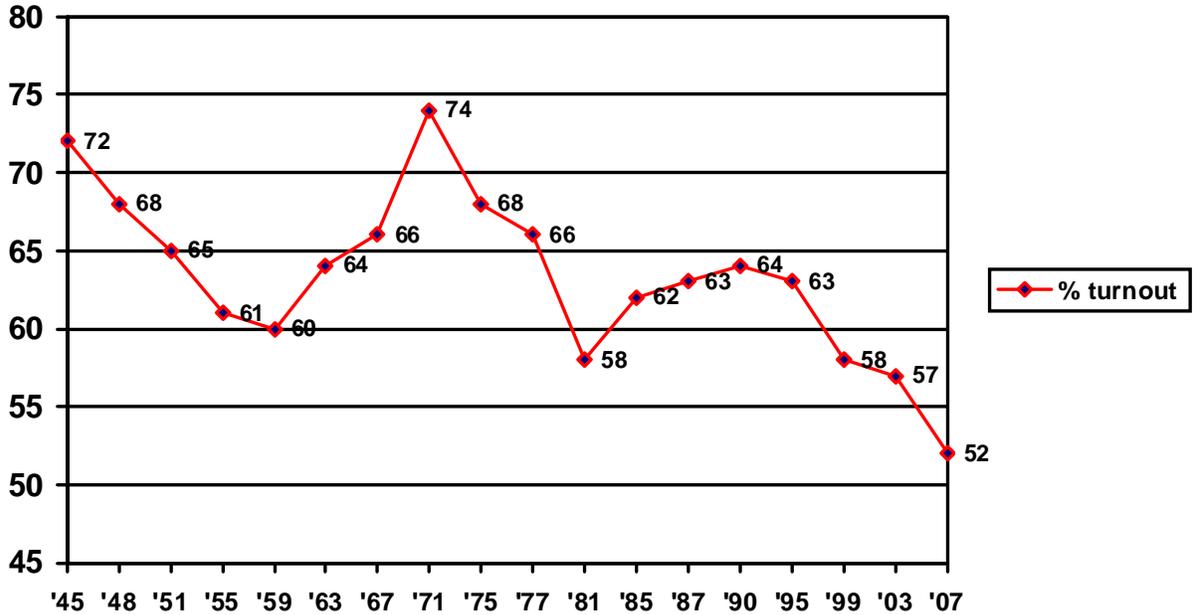**Figure 2:**
Turnout in Ontario Provincial Elections, 1945-2007

Table 1: Cynicism in Ontario

Question	% Agree
Government doesn't care what people like me think	59.47
Those elected to Parliament soon lose touch with the people	73.74
Do not trust government to do what is right ever or only some of the time	67.28
Government wastes a lot or some of the money we pay in taxes	92.61
Quite a few of the pole running the government are a little crooked	28.95
Government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves	53.7
Satisfied with the way democracy works in Ontario	74.04
In favour of fixed date elections in Ontario	74.54
All parties are basically the same; there isn't really a choice	41.05

Table 2: Attitudes about Fairness and Proportionality

Question	% Agree
If party wins 40% of vote, should get 40% of seats	50.29
It is unacceptable that a party can win a majority of seats without winning a majority of votes	43.46
It is acceptable that a party can win a majority of seats without winning a majority of votes	29.42
Don't know if it is acceptable or unacceptable that a party can win a majority of seats without winning a majority of votes	26.65
Better to have a majority government	43.89
Better to have a minority government	29.42
No difference between majority and minority governments	23.06

Table 3: Logit Results for MMP Vote

	Odds Ratio	Robust Standard Error
Age	0.987*	0.006
University Education	1.196	0.247
Income	1.033	0.035
Interest in election	1.130**	0.053
Cynicism	0.723*	0.122
Satisfaction with Democracy	1.209	0.175
Proportionality appropriate	1.143	0.227
FPP outcome unacceptable	4.416***	0.892
Minority government better	2.129***	0.421
Pseudo R2	0.1571	
N	807	

*=p<0.10 **=p<0.01 ***=p<0.001

Table 4: Support for MMP by Partisan Identity

	Liberal	PC	NDP	Green
Oppose	75%	74%	52%	50%
Favour	25%	26%	48%	50%

Table 5: Party Positions on MMP

Party		All Ontarians	Partisans
Liberal	Favour %	16.82	18.67
	Oppose %	20.76	18.51
	DK %	62.4	62.81
PC	Favour %	10.85	15.71
	Oppose %	26.39	28.45
	DK %	62.74	55.84
NDP	Favour %	30.10	44.11
	Oppose %	7.92	6.38
	DK %	61.97	49.51
Green	Favour %	30.35	43.64
	Oppose %	6.32	5.08
	DK %	63.33	51.28

Table 6: Logit Results on MMP Vote, including Party Positions

	Odds Ratio	Robust Standard Error
Age	0.987*	0.006
University Education	1.336	0.263
Income	1.018	0.031
Interest in election	1.145**	0.050
Liberal PID	1.140	0.338
PC PID	1.393	0.471
NDP PID	1.674	0.684
Green PID	2.683	1.683
Liberal Opposed	1.460	0.412
PC Opposed	1.707*	0.421
NDP In Favour	1.245	0.344
Green in Favour	1.438	0.369
PID*Liberals Opposed	0.238**	0.111
PID* PC Opposed	0.192**	0.100
PID* NDP in Favour	2.142	1.065
PID* Green in Favour	1.966	1.616
PseudoR2	0.1273	
N	811	

*=$p<0.10$ **=$p<0.01$ ***=$p<0.001$

Table 7: Frequency of Responses, "How familiar are you with the new electoral system that has been proposed by the Citizens' Assembly, a Mixed Member Proportional system?"

Very familiar	19.8%
Somewhat familiar	45.56
Not very familiar	20.89
Not at all familiar	11.5
Have never heard of MMP	2.17

Table 8: Correlations of Demographics and Partisanship with Level of Information about MMP

Variable	Significance
Age above average	0.0101
University education	0.0000
Income above average	0.0000
Interest in election above average	0.0000
Interest in politics above average	0.0000
Lib PID	0.0675
PC PID	0.0793
NDP PID	0.1119
Green PID	0.1324

Table 9: Regression Results for Level of Information about MMP

Variable	Coefficient	Std Error	P>t
Age	0.001	0.002	0.647
University Education	0.217	0.072	0.003
Income (dummy for above mean)	0.054	0.011	0.000
Interest in election (dummy for above mean)	0.030	0.017	0.085
Interest in politics (dummy for above mean)	0.110	0.017	0.000
Constant	2.297	0.153	0.000
N	810	R2	0.2041

*=p<0.10 **=p<0.01 ***=p<0.001

Table 10: Relationship of Information about MMP (dichotomous) and Attitudes toward Proportionality

	Low MMP Information (Not very familiar, not at all, have never heard of MMP)	High MMP Information (Very and somewhat familiar)	Significant Difference?
Proportionality	43.59%	53.84%	P=0.0064
FPP Acceptable	16%	36.54%	P=0.0000
FPP Unacceptable	41.07%	44.73%	P=0.0000
Minority government better	23.01%	34.47%	P=0.0008

Table 11: Logit Regression Results, by Information

	Full Model		Low MMP Information		High MMP Information	
	Odds Ratio	**Robust Std. Error**	**Odds Ratio**	**Robust Std. Error**	**Odds Ratio**	**Robust Std. Error**
Age	0.987*	0.006	0.988	0.011	0.985*	0.008
University Education	1.056	0.231	1.624	0.893	1.037	0.257
Income	1.024	0.036	0.923	0.064	1.048	0.046
Interest in election	1.078	0.054	1.072	0.090	1.070	0.067
Cynicism	0.870	0.155	1.990	0.862	0.610*	0.124
Satisfaction with Democracy	1.123	0.151	0.814	0.195	1.384*	0.230
Proportionality appropriate	1.011	0.213	1.106	0.510	1.038	0.252
FPP outcome unacceptable	4.133***	0.863	2.164*	0.968	6.247***	1.479
Minority government better	1.727**	0.363	1.876	0.848	1.685*	0.401
Informed about MMP	1.779***	0.233				
Liberal PID	1.401	0.447	0.828	0.576	1.605	0.605
PC PID	1.379	0.473	1.234	0.946	1.440	0.574
NDP PID	2.065	1.020	3.658*	2.454	0.998	0.638
Green PID	1.790	1.159	3.273	3.539	1.498	1.289
Liberal Opposed	1.576	0.466	1.800	1.355	1.526	0.490
PC Opposed	1.545	0.438	1.965	1.413	1.589	0.515
NDP In Favour	1.284	0.368	4.476*	3.599	0.990	0.315
Green in Favour	1.010	0.263	1.556	1.210	0.876	0.247
PID*Liberals Opposed	0.206**	0.104	0.282	0.354	0.190**	0.103
PID* PC Opposed	0.182**	0.095	0.318	0.524	0.200**	0.115
PID* NDP in Favour	1.215	0.733	0.170	0.201	3.145	2.330
PID* Green in Favour	2.490	2.309	0.813	1.221	2.131	2.591
R2	0.2346		0.1838		0.2469	
N	807		270		537	
Predicted Vote for MMP	29.7%		29.5%		38.8%	
Predicted Vote if Informed about MMP=1 (minimum)		10.3%				
Predicted Vote if Informed about MMP=5 (maximum)		41.7%				

*=p<0.10 **=p<0.01 ***=p<0.001

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