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British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform

No. 90 | submitted by: swdgray | 13.08.2010 | 21:33

Location: Canada, Vancouver, British Columbia
Time span: January 1, 2004-May, 2009
Initiated by: Government of British Columbia

In 2004, the government of British Columbia (BC) embarked on a bold experiment in institutional design: it organized the province's first citizens assembly and empowered 160 near-randomly selected citizens to spend eleven months reassessing the province's electoral system. If the Assembly found that the electoral system could be improved, it was mandated to recommend a new system to the government, which it committed to putting to a referendum. For a year, selected participants met approximately every other weekend to deliberate about alternative voting arrangements. And, in October 2004, the Assembly concluded that the province's existing 'First Past the Post' electoral arrangement should be replaced with Single Transferable Voting system. The Assembly's final recommendation was put to a popular referendum held concurrently with the province's election in 2005. The referendum required approval by 60% of voters, with final results falling just short at 57.7% of voters in favour of reform. Because of the inconclusive results of the first referendum, the government held another in the spring of 2009 - this time, with 62% of voters opposing the proposed electoral change.

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Project Description

Problem and objective

The proximate cause of the BC Citizens' Assembly was an election that, in terms of the popular vote, returned the 'wrong' results. In 1996, the province's Liberal Party won fewer seats in the provincial legislature than the incumbent New Democratic Party (NDP), despite having won the popular vote 41.8% to 39.5%. Following this defeat, Liberal leader Gordon Campbell promised to establish a 'citizens assembly' to assess the electoral system should the Liberals come to power - which they did in the subsequent election of 2000.

The 1996 electoral result in BC is just one example of a deeper democratic deficit in Westminster-style electoral systems. Because voters cast ballots for a single member of the legislature, and not a party, there is often a significant divergence in an elected party's total seats and proportion of the popular vote - producing results that often fail basic and widely-held criteria of representative democracy. The main obstacle to reform, however, is that decisions about the structure of basic political institutions - including, the size of electoral districts, campaign financing rules, as well as voting systems - are frequently made by sitting legislative bodies that will choose rules that advance party-interest in re-election rather than those that reflect general democratic values.

In creating the BC Citizens' Assembly, the government hoped that empowering citizens rather than politicians or political elites to make recommendations on the electoral system would produce a more fair, unbiased and, ultimately, legitimate electoral arrangement.

Structure and process

The precise format and structure of the Citizens' Assembly was designed on the recommendations of a former legislator and Liberal party leader who was empowered by the BC Legislature to consider several alternative's for the assembly's format. Because the Assembly was to be a quasi-legislative body, the government required that the chosen format be broadly representative of the entire adult population of BC - especially with regards to age, gender, geographical location, and income.

In order to meet this 'representativeness' criteria, participant selection for the Citizen's Assembly was done through a modified version of random selection using the provincial voter registry. Potential participant names were randomly drawn from the registry, with an equal number (two) drawn from each of the province's 79 electoral ridings. In addition, an equal number of men and women were selected, and the sampling was modified to mirror the age distribution of citizens over 18 in the province. Two additional delegates were added to ensure Aboriginal representation in the assembly proceedings, and were selected by a random draw from those who had attended Participants were paid an honorarium of \$150 per day, and provided with daycare, transportation to and from assembly events, and accommodation.

In total, the Citizens' Assembly comprised 160 citizen-delegates and was provided with a significant support staff - including a permanent chair and advisory secretariat. By design, assembly proceedings were insulated from political interference by political parties and all briefing materials and expert-testimony was chosen to ensure that no particular electoral-alternative received special preference.

Structurally, the assembly was broken down into three phases. First, the

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FACT SHEET

Status: finalised
Country: Canada
Scale: regional
Project type: participatory institution/reform
Method(s) used: paper voting, forums/councils/commissions, assemblies
Participation selection: random selection
Policy area / Issue area: Electoral Reform

RATING (Votes: 9, avg: 4,1)

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wbergerud | 18.12.2010 | 18:44 | Replies: 0

Web sites

[It is nice to see that the Citizens' Assembly's website is now completely back online...](#)

swdgray | 16.08.2010 | 12:04 | Replies: 0

This project is prize-worthy because ...

Although many government's (i.e in South Africa and Germany) have previously utilized 'citizens assemblies' as a means of...

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assembly delegates went through a 'learning phase' taking place over six weekends from January to March. During these meetings, experts were brought in to lecture delegates on the basics of different electoral models in large-group sessions. After these sessions, delegates broke into smaller discussion groups to debate what they had just heard and read, and then met in a larger plenary to share their views with one another. The groups were randomly assigned, and changed every weekend to encourage team-building.

The second phase involved extensive 'public hearings' that ran from May to June 2004. In this phase, individual delegates were asked to host some fifty hearings across the province to elicit the views and opinions of their fellow citizens and garner general feedback from the public. Assembly delegates also heard arguments from interest groups, advocacy organizations, and political parties. In total, approximately 3,000 people participated in the public hearings, and the Citizens Assembly received some 1,600 additional submissions from online or in-print.

The third and final phase involved intense 'deliberation' and unfolded between September and November 2004. In this phase, rather than learn and listen delegates were tasked with developing (through consensus) a final recommendation for the electoral system they thought would best suit the needs of the province. Based on the results of public feedback, the Assembly quickly concluded that there was little public support for the current electoral system and considered to alternatives: the Single Transferable Vote system and the Mixed Member Proportional system. After months of deliberation, a final recommendation to present to the public was agreed upon through a secret ballot aimed at tallying individual delegates final judgements.

Impact

In its final vote, the Citizens' Assembly chose to select the Single Transferable Voting system as a preferable alternative to the province's current 'First Past the Post' arrangement. An overwhelming majority of delegates (146 in favor, 7 against) also supported a recommendation to put its findings to a popular referendum.

In order to enact the Assembly's recommendation, the referendum question needed to elicit 60% of the popular vote, and a majority of the vote in each of the province's 79 ridings (a so-called 'super-majority'). On May 17, 2005 British Columbians were asked to answer 'yes' or 'no' to the following question: 'Should British Columbia change to the BC-STV system as recommended by the Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform?'

The results of the 2005 were ambiguous: 57.4% of total voters voted to endorse the Assembly's recommendation; and in 77 of 79 ridings the Assembly received a majority. As a result, in September 2005 the provincial government committed to re-submit the Assembly's recommendations to another referendum to be held in November 2008 (later delayed until May 2009). In the second referendum, the Assembly's recommendations were defeated once more with 38.82% of voters endorsing the Single Transferable Vote alternative.

Detailed Information

Broader context

The Citizens' Assembly was drafted as a popular quasi-legislative body with the power to propose reforms to the basic structure of the province's electoral system. The recommendations that emerged from the Assembly were put to a popular referendum.

As a deliberative process intended to draft a proposal for popular decision, this made the BC Citizens' Assembly unique in both its power and scope. It is also notable for having been government-initiated and supported - with the initial proposal to convene the Citizens' Assembly was part of a wider package of political reforms initiated by the Liberty party in its 2000 election platform.

After consulting widely with activists, politicians, public figures and academics, a detailed recommendation for the scope and design of the Assembly was submitted to the BC Legislative Assembly. The Liberal government adopted the recommendation and asked the Legislative Assembly to support the initiative - which it did unanimously, convening a special committee to oversee the process. The initial design of the assembly was intended maximize the quality of deliberation and decision-making to ensure that it was able to present informed, robust, and transparent recommendations to both the government and wider public.

Type of contribution by participants

They determined the outcomes of the project

Target group

Given that reform of the electoral system was an issue of concern for all registered voters in the province, the assembly was designed to create a descriptive representation of the people of BC. In order to maximize the forums deliberative capacity, 26, 500 randomly selected names were drawn from the voter registry and invited to participate in the forum. Of this initial random draw, 1,441 responded indicating a willingness to attend a selection meeting, and 964 actually attended. From this pool, 158 delegates were drawn by lot and then nominated to be a delegate. An additional two spots were reserved to ensure Aboriginal representation, again nominated from the respondent pool. This brought the total number of delegates selected up to 160.

Total number of people addressed by the project (approx.)

4,419,000

Total number of active participants (approx.)

Specific effort made to include disadvantaged groups

Extensive effort to address disadvantaged groups

Because of the scope of its mandate, the primary goal of the Assembly's design was to create a fully representative microcosm of the population of BC. In order to ensure that the views of a diverse range of British Columbians were included in deliberations, the selection process was modified to account for gender and regional parity as well as a wide selection of age groups. Structural checks were put in place to guarantee representation from marginalized populations, such as BC's Aboriginal community. In addition, the use of near-random selection also resulted in a diversity of participants from different ethnic backgrounds, employment history, and education levels. Selected members of the Citizens' Assembly came from fifteen different countries, spoke a range of languages, and had levels of education ranging from high school diplomas to PhDs. An honorarium of \$ 150 a day was provided to ensure those of lower income could participate, daycare was provided for those with children, and transportation was paid for to ensure those from isolated locations could attend all meetings. Finally, Assembly proceedings were broadcast on the provincial legislatures cable television channel and its findings were made available in English, French, Mandarin, and Punjabi in order to engage the broader public.

Specific effort made to strengthen democratic capacities

Part of the appeal of granting small deliberative bodies like the Citizens' Assembly the authority to make decisions on behalf of the public is that they are designed to be insulated from interference by political parties or special interest groups and allow participants a chance to become 'experts' on the issue at hand. One of the initial reasons for convening the assembly was a growing concern that voters were becoming increasingly disengaged in the electoral process, and lacked sufficient information to demand alternatives. Apart from its unique mandate - which, in effect, allowed a citizen-body the power to recommend the redesigning of a fundamental democratic institution and place the decision in the hands of the people - the first two phases of the project were designed to overcome issues of voter-ignorance about electoral reform. In the first phase, delegates themselves were granted the chance to become 'experts' about the issue and, in the second phase, were provided the opportunity to disseminate this information to the broader public and hear their own views. Thus the Assembly had the effect of not only increasing the quantity of democratic decision-making, but its overall quality as well.

Adoption by others

In many cases

Costs

US \$ 5,500,000

Time and working days

12 months

Links

For more information on the history of the British Columbia Citizen's Assembly see:

- BC Citizen's Assembly Website [Link](#)

-The Citizen's Assembly Blog [Link](#)

-Participedia [Link](#)

For more detailed information about the Assembly's proceedings, as well as the results of the first and second referendums see:

BC Citizen's Assembly website: [Link](#)

For scholarly analysis of the Assembly process see:

-R. Kenneth Carty. 2005. 'Turning Voters into Citizens: The Citizens' Assembly and Reforming Democratic Politics,' in *Democracy and Federalism Series 3*. Kingston: Queen's-McGill Press.

-Robert Goodin and John Dryzek. 2005. 'Deliberative Impacts: The Macro-Political Uptake of Mini-Publics,' in *Politics and Society* 38(2): 219-244.

-Amy Lang. 2007. 'But Is It For Real? The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly as a Model of State-Sponsored Citizen Empowerment,' in *Politics and Society* 35(1): 35-70.

-Peter Levine, Archon Fung, and John Gatsil. 2005. 'Future directions for public deliberation,' in *Journal of Public Deliberation* 1(1).

-Mark Warren and Hillary Pearce (eds.) 2008. *Designing Deliberative Democracy: The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

The final report of the BC Citizens' Assembly can also be found attached below.

Documents

Download File 1: [653_265_final_report.pdf](#)

Download File 2: [653_303_Case_Study_British_Columbia.pdf](#)

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