

CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON ELECTORAL REFORM
ANSWERS TO WRITTEN QUESTIONS SUBMITTED TO
JULIAN WEST

September 11 2004

From David Wills

Your idea of Circuits is novel but one of the major criticisms of STV is that the counting system is too complex. I am concerned that your idea of Circuits will make a complex system even more convoluted. Your comments, please.

Answer:

Different people will look at an election from different angles, and in varying levels of depth and detail. Certainly for someone who wants to study the result in every district, and within that in every circuit, there will be a lot to keep track of. But there are relatively few of us who do that. From the point of view of most voters, there is one question the morning after the election, and that is "who won?". By this the voter usually means "which parties won how many seats?" and "who is my local MLA?". As far as this second question goes, STV with circuits is simpler than STV without circuits, as now this observer can be provided with a single name instead of a list of four or five names. Of course from the other angle, "whom did my vote help elect?", one then has to look at all the MLAs in a district because it is entirely likely that the voters ballot ended up contributing to the quota of candidate who has been assigned to a different circuit in the same district.

While I concede your point that the *counting system* in particular is complex, I don't feel that STV is a complicated or difficult system for the voter. After STV was first introduced in the UK, for a local election in County Sligo, the local paper wrote about its simplicity and said "it is as easy as the old way".

The fact that STV was discovered by two people simultaneously, Hare in England and Andrae in Denmark, shows that it is a natural solution to a simple problem. STV is, and I mean this in a mathematical sense, the correct and natural solution to the question "how do we ensure that each elected member represents the same number of voters?". I can assure you that this system is the correct answer to that question. What I can't decide for you is whether that is the right question. To me it sounds like it is, but I think that is a decision for the Assembly.

From John Zall

If parties cannot limit or exclude candidates in any riding seeking election under their banner, how do we know that the candidate standing for the party really represents the goals of the party?

Answer:

What I proposed in my written submission this spring was that candidates be required to gather signatures from rank-and-file party members. This would be supplementary to the signatures they are already required to gather from registered voters, so that a candidate might have to collect 50 signatures from voters in her district, and then perhaps another 50 from party members living anywhere in British Columbia. Since in my view the members *are* the party, approval by a significant number of members would mean that the candidate represents an important current of thought within his or her own party.

We should realize that in many other countries, party structures are much weaker than they are here, and it is not uncommon for a candidate to be rejected by his party's selectors and then to take his case directly to the voters. In Ireland there are not infrequently candidates elected as "Independent Fianna Fail", in France as "Dissenting RPR", and so forth.

From Shoni Field

You say that STV is an "unbeatable system" in terms of voter choice. While it is true that voters would be able to choose from multiple candidates within a party, it is my understanding that the number of effective

political parties in STV is lower than the average in proportional systems. It could be said that MMP does well in increasing the number of parties a voter can choose from and STV in increasing the number of candidates. Would you agree that both a variety of parties and a number of candidates would represent the best voter choice? Is there some variation of one of the systems that in your opinion would provide voter choice of both candidates and parties? Are you concerned that in systems with a lower number of effective political parties you would probably see parties that are more "catch all"?

Answer:

The lack of voter choice under MMP is a significant concern. Take the case of a closed-list system in which the number two candidate on some party's list makes controversial statements during the election which cause me to oppose that candidate. I want to vote to elect the number three and four candidates on the same list, but there is no way I can express this preference as it is literally impossible for the third person to be elected unless the second person is as well. This is the antithesis of voter choice. The same concern applies to open-list systems because no list is as open in practice as it appears to be on paper.

Whether MMP would raise or lower the number of parties depends on what threshold is used. MMP advocates in BC have consistently asked for a 5% threshold, which Irish research suggests would reduce the number of parties elected.

If you are concerned about providing for small parties under STV, there are two things you can do: use Hare rather than Droop quotas, and (more importantly) maintain a reasonably high district magnitude. In my proposal, most of the population would live in districts with at least 5 members, and this would increase over time as fifth seats are added in the Fraser Valley, Semiahmoo-Langley and Okanagan-Similkameen (leaving only 31 MLAs representing small districts). If, additionally, it was decided to merge the 2-seat and 3-seat districts in the north into five-seaters (as I proposed) this would leave only 16 MLAs representing small districts.

As Farrell writes: "It is generally accepted that the optimal size for STV constituencies is at least five seats . . . in Ireland, however, a large proportion of the constituencies are three or four seats" (first edition, p. 128)

I believe that a five-seater variation of STV will provide adequately for all parties, as the Irish data shows. I do not, on the other hand, have confidence that any variation on a party list system will provide adequate voter choice among candidates within parties. My fear is that any list system, however open it may appear, will function as a closed, or nearly closed, list in practice.

It is true that parties under STV might want to make a broad appeal because they must try to capture second preferences from voters for other parties. This can be seen as a good or a bad thing. But I don't believe that the recent Irish experience of STV has led to the exclusive election of 'catch-all' parties; various parties with clear ideological positions (Green, Labour, Sinn Fein) have been elected, as indeed have various independents.

From Anna Rankin

If STV is a more "local" system than SMP, why would circuits be required? Is there a 70% chance that my MLA will not be further away than in the SMP system?

Answer:

Circuits are not required. I do not mean to suggest that the adoption of STV should stand or fall on the "circuits" model in particular. I think that STV is the best choice for British Columbia whether or not circuits are included.

I have mentioned circuits because it is a possible enhancement to STV which could be considered, and I wanted the Assembly to be aware of and to think about this option. However, I set out my recommendation in favour of circuits as subsequent to and independent of my recommendation in favour of STV.

I don't view circuits as a 'fix' for STV, because I don't believe it requires fixing. I regard them as an enhancement.

From Sally de Luna

Can you simplify how Circuit system works? Is it necessary that the candidates are native to their constituency, or can they be roving representatives? How can a representative be the "Voice of the Community" if he/she does not reside in the local community?

Answer:

The best suggestion I have heard for assigning members to circuits came from John Buker, who is a doctoral candidate in physics at SFU and who read my proposals on the Internet. John suggested that each candidate should declare which circuit they wished to represent. In the case that two elected candidates preferred the same circuit, first choice would be given to the one who outranked the other on the majority of ballots cast in that circuit.

It is true that there may be instances in which two elected candidates reside in the same circuit, and one of these would have to represent a circuit where he does not live. However, candidates may have links to a community in other ways. In my own case, I live in Ladysmith, but I work in Nanaimo, so if I were elected I could plausibly represent either of those circuits. In many cases, a person will live in one circuit, work in a second, and have grown up in a third, all within the same district. Or the person may have served on a school board or in a regional government that covers the district as a whole. I think in practice these things will sort themselves out.

From Wendy Bergerud

Could the preferential-plus system be successful if the preferential ballots were counted in a different way than the proposed STV? Such as approval voting? What is the potential for perverse results in AV and STV?

Answer:

This question was intended for Nick Loenen.

Briefly, I'd be very concerned about using approval voting to select a legislature as it would result in the election of the least offensive candidates. In many cases these might be small-party candidates with very little first-preference support.

JULIAN WEST'S REPLIES TO SOME QUESTIONS ASKED OF BRUCE HALLSOR

West: I have taken the liberty of replying to some of the questions directed to Bruce as he and I serve together on the council of Fair Vote Canada.

From Wendy Bergerud

Would you agree that MMP mixes two of the worst systems together: constituency seats selected by plurality votes and closed-list PR where the party leadership chooses who is at the top and their list? Would you agree that this is a "fix" of the FPTP system instead of an overhaul of our electoral system?

Answer:

I agree that MMP is to some extent a "fix" of the current system, and indeed its advocates have often tried to sell it as such. They argue that MMP would preserve most of the current system, but correct for the one problem they see, its lack of proportionality (in terms of first-preference party vote).

The Assembly has studied the current system deeply enough to see that there are other problems with "FPTP" besides lack of proportionality. For instance, the sweep effect in which the result in one riding is repeated over and over across the province. This does not disappear under MMP, but takes a variant form: under FPTP, the largest party has a monopoly in the legislature, while under MMP the largest party is burned with the majority of constituency work.

From John Zall

Given that the four objectives in the Fair Vote Statement of Purpose are to some degree inconsistent, how would you rank the relative importance of these objectives?

Answer:

Because the element which is most conspicuously lacking in our current system is proportionality, the electoral reform movement has generally been thought of as a movement for “proportional representation”. Most of us, however, view proportionality as only one desirable characteristic of electoral systems. In my earlier submissions to the Citizens’ Assembly, I explained that I had come to realize over a period of years that voter choice is as important as proportionality, in the sense that I personally would not be satisfied with a system from which either one was missing.

In my view these are essential elements of any voting system. The degree to which geographic representation is or is not important depends on the local geography. The Dutch parliament, famously, has no districts at all. I think this probably works fine in the Netherlands, because most Dutch politicians are probably familiar with the entire country. (I can say this because even I have seen almost every part of the Netherlands, and I’ve spent less than two months there.) In British Columbia, this is obviously not possible and our geographic diversity is comparable to our social diversity in terms of requiring representation.

The fourth criterion, “stable and responsive government”, is also important, but is harder to build into the voting system directly. This may require more thought than the other three criteria.

From Anna Rankin

What do you say to critics who claim proportional systems such as MMP and STV will create coalition governments that are inherently unstable?

Answer:

I would say that proportional representation will facilitate (not “create”) coalition governments, but that coalitions are not inherently unstable. Instability in political systems comes from sources unrelated to the voting system.

Under the present SMP system, coalitions tend to be unstable because small vote-swings from election to election result in wild seat-swings. Therefore, coalition partners (and minority administrations) who are up in the polls have an incentive to force an election in the hope of snagging a majority government.

Under proportional systems, results are much more stable. And, since the result of a new election would likely be another coalition (quite possibly involving the same partners) there is less incentive to call an election.

From Anna Rankin

Do you believe that voters in BC would rather have more choice to select their own candidates from a party (e.g., STV) or do you believe they would rather leave the issue of choosing representatives in the hands of the party, e.g., list systems like MMP?

Answer:

I think it is absolutely clear that the voters would rather have the choice. (In all fairness, there is a case to be made for doing it the other way, on the grounds that party insiders, not the voters, would best know their candidates and could better make this choice. But I think it remains clear which the voters would go for if asked!)

From Anna Rankin

Which system, STV or MMP, would result in more women getting elected in B.C.?

Answer:

Overall, I don't know. They are about equally proportional in terms of parties, so I imagine they will be about equally proportional in other dimensions as well. However – and this is vitally important – STV would result in more women being elected on the *government* side of the legislature. I make this point at more length below.

Each system would on its own increase the number of women somewhat. The number would be further raised if quotas (either imposed by law or voluntarily adopted by parties) are used. These could be combined with either system. There has been a suggestion that quotas are most easily combined with party lists, especially quotas for women because an alternating ‘zipper’ could be employed. However, one could just as easily require parties to nominate equal numbers of men and women in an STV district. For that matter, one could also employ quotas with FPTP – either by electing one man and one woman per district (as Nunavut considered) or by using all-women shortlists in some ridings (as the Labour Party in the U.K. has, contentiously, tried).

This is not an argument for or against quotas, just a statement that if a country (or party) genuinely wishes to use them, they could be employed under any system.

The partial failure of the French ‘zipper’ lists is a reminder that there are few guarantees. Parties were required to put lists alternating by gender, or pay a fine. The far right extremist party simply paid the fine. The remaining parties typically put up lists which began ‘man-woman-man-woman...’ rather than ‘woman-man-woman-man...’. For a large party electing say, ten candidates in five districts and eleven in another five, this would produce a reasonably balanced caucus of 55 men and 50 women. However, for a small party like the Greens, who usually elected one or zero candidates from each list, almost no women were elected.

A complementary problem happened in Wales (relating to ethnic minorities, not to women), and I mentioned this in my speech. The Labour party was the only one to set aside seats at the top of the list for black and Asian candidates. But because they won the election handily, they elected no one off lists at

all, and the affirmative action step failed. (Also one minority candidate who was thought to have a good chance lost in her constituency.)

This Welsh example has clear and significant implications in relation to women's representation. While STV would increase the representation of women in the caucuses of every party, MMP would only increase the representation of women in those parties who elect people off the party lists. Because the governing party would elect few if any list candidates, this would mean that women would forever be well-represented in opposition, but not in government – meaning that the cabinet would still be dominated by men, even as the legislature became more representative. (The same would probably be true for minorities as well.)

From Sally de Luna

On behalf of the Citizens' Assembly, we thank you for your trust and confidence in us. Your four objectives will be part of our studies in our deliberation phase. While the FVC does not advocate any particular model, do you mean that the electoral system must identify with your four objectives?

Answer:

Yes. All four should be given some weight.