

Electoral Reform Mythbuster

This October 10, when you go to vote, you will be handed two ballots. One is the usual ballot to elect your local representative while the other is for the referendum on electoral reform.

Unfortunately, this second item, which is arguably more important than the first, is not getting the attention it deserves.

What is missing is adequate public education on why the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform overwhelmingly endorsed a new system of voting called Mixed Member Proportional, or MMP for short. This is a great disservice to the people of

MYTH: This is being foisted on us against our will.

FACT: The current government made this referendum part of its election platform in 2003. In creating the Citizens' Assembly and holding the referendum, it is merely following its mandate. In fact, the real problem is the lack of resources the government has put into educating the public about the referendum.

MYTH: MMP is a rarely used system.

FACT: MMP is one of a number of forms of proportional representation (PR). Under PR, the number of seats a party gets directly reflects the share of the vote they get. If you get 40% of the vote, you get 40% of the seats. PR systems are the overwhelming choice in democratic nations. Most of the world's democracies have switched to some form of PR over the last century. The handful that remain, except for the U.S. and Canada, are mainly third world countries that sometimes have little claim to be called democracies.

No jurisdiction has ever willingly switched back to the first past the post system. However, PR systems can be subdivided into categories depending on the details of the election process. If you divide PR systems into these categories, then MMP is not as popular as systems that do away entirely with local candidates and rely exclusively on party slates. The Citizens'

Ontario because we really do need to know not just the mechanics of the process (which is all that Elections Ontario is being allowed to tell us) but about how it actually works and the experiences of other jurisdictions that use it.

Because of this education void, there is currently more heat than light in what is passing for debate on the subject. And there are many myths being propagated about the system that just don't stand up to scrutiny. I'm writing this to address some of those myths.

Assembly thought that those systems would not be the best choice for Ontario right now.

MYTH: The new system will result in MPPs being appointed by their parties instead of being elected.

FACT: In the proposed system, you would get two votes. One is for the local representative (just like the current system) while the other is for the party you wish to form the government. This second vote is used to determine how many candidates from each party's slate get elected. The party slates (and how they are picked) are made available to the public when the campaign starts. Your party vote, and not some backroom process, elects people from the party slates.

MYTH: The party slates will be filled with party hacks.

FACT: The experience of every other jurisdiction that uses this system shows the exact opposite. Parties are judged on the quality of their slates and the way they are chosen. Any party that uses their slates to push unelectable people will find itself losing votes. On the other hand, the current system actually allows for much worse. Because the local representative vote includes the party preference vote, some parties routinely override local constituency associations, either through coercion or more direct means, to reward the party faithful with a safe seat. MMP actually gives the voters more control, not less.

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MYTH: The party slate MPPs aren't responsible to any constituency the way local representatives are.

FACT: In every instance where MMP is used, the parties ensure that their lists reflect the different regions in the jurisdiction. Usually they do this by having the riding associations in an area nominate their slate candidates. This means each slate MPP is responsible for the area they were nominated in. If a voter can't get help from their local representative, they can go to one of the party slate MPPs of their choice.

MYTH: MMP leads to unstable minority governments.

FACT: Governments using MMP tend to be more stable than governments using our current system. Germany, for example, has had fewer elections than Ontario since they adopted MMP after World War II. And New Zealand's governments have seen a similar increase in stability since they switched to MMP a dozen years ago. The reason for this is that MMP, like any proportional system, doesn't produce wide swings in election results from small changes in voter preferences. Moreover, because legislation must be supported by MPPs representing a majority of the voters, policies tend to be more stable as well.

MYTH: MMP leads to backroom deals to keep governments afloat.

FACT: Nothing could be further from the truth.

In fact the most notorious backroom deal making occurs in the other major bastion of first past the post, the United States. In an MMP system, parties want to publicise their deals, because it shows the voters what they could and couldn't accomplish with the number of seats they were given. By doing this, they hope to influence the voters to give them more seats the next time.

MYTH: MMP gives fringe parties inordinate power.

FACT: The proposed system sets a threshold of 3% before a party elects any slate candidates. In MMP jurisdictions the voters elect about the same number of parties as Ontario. And as the current federal government has shown, any party can vote with any other party on a given issue. It is up to the governing party to find another party willing to work with it. In Germany, for example, the current government is a coalition between the right-wing Christian Democrats and the left-wing Social Democrats.

MYTH: MMP is a plot by the socialists / communists / whatever to take over our government.

FACT: OK, this last one is a little over the top, but I have heard people claiming MMP is a communist system. In fact, as the experience in the rest of the democratic world shows, any form of PR really gives the voters more control. MMP is about improving the way we elect our governments.

Resources:

The Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform	http://www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca/ .
Fair Vote Canada	http://www.fairvotecanada.org/
Vote for MMP	http://voteformmp.ca/ .

The Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform are to be thanked for the effort they put into choosing a better system of voting for Ontario. It's up to us now to ensure that their efforts weren't in vain. On October 10, cast an informed vote for MMP.