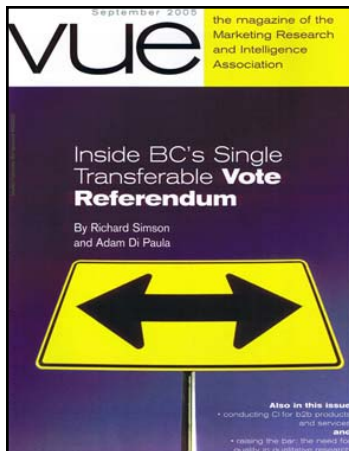


Inside BC's Single Transferable Vote Referendum

By Richard Simson and Adam Di Paula



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While most polling companies were busy tracking the ups and downs of the political campaigns, there was another interesting issue simmering in British Columbia - the STV referendum. No, that's not STD, but STV, which stands for Single Transferable Vote - not sexually transmitted disease. The proposed system is admittedly complex, even by the admissions of those who designed it. In short, STV is a modified version of proportional representation.

By way of background, Premier Campbell initiated the process, in part, to counter criticism of his massive majority government. Facing only two opposition members in the legislature after the 2001 election gave the perception that the government wasn't being held accountable. Some criticized the 'first-past-the-post' election system as having yielded a lopsided result. Despite the fact that the NDP received 21.6% of the popular vote in 2001, on a riding-by-riding basis this only amounted to two MLAs out of 79. Pressure was on to change the electoral system.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to explain in detail the workings of the proposed STV system, its complexity inspired famed pollster Angus Reid to comment "I have a Ph.D. in statistics and I can't understand it." Educating the general public about such a proposal would take time....and a greater degree of communications. Anyone who has worked in communications can attest the difficulty in explaining public policy to voters.

Research conducted by NRG Research Group showed that although awareness increased significantly during the election period (as measured by the number of respondents who could name STV), the percentage of respondents who felt 'very informed' remained low. People knew that something was being proposed in a referendum, but did not have a lot of details or

specifics.

This is largely due to the lack of communication by either the 'yes' or 'no' campaigns. Compared to the Liberal and NDP campaigns which spent thousands of dollars on ads, direct mail, and telephoning, the STV campaigns - yes and no combined - spent only a fraction. The main thrust of the 'yes' side was a series of town hall meetings across the province to promote STV. In addition, there was a province-wide mailing by the Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform explaining the system. However, much like the proposal itself the brochure was complex and difficult to understand.

Despite the lack of knowledge of the system and its workings, the results of the May 17th referendum appear to show strong, broad support for STV. Just over 57% of those who cast a referendum ballot said 'yes', while 43% voted against the proposal. STV also enjoyed fairly strong support in every corner of the province - STV passed with over 50% in the vast majority of BC ridings. For approval, the threshold required that 60% of all those who vote approve the measure and that a majority of voters in 48 of the 79 BC constituencies also approve it.

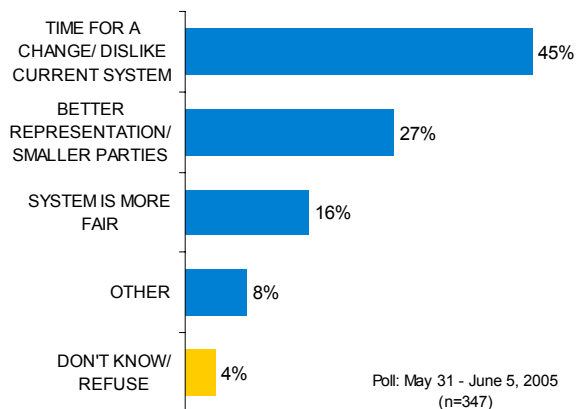
A Vote for 'Change' Not STV

In polling we reported just days before the election, only 32% of respondents could name 'STV' - the majority of people didn't know what it was. NRG did three polls during the election on this issue, asking voters in BC about their awareness, knowledge and support for STV. While general awareness of the referendum did increase significantly among voters during the course of the

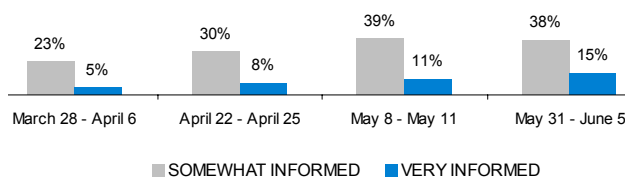
campaign, reaching 82% in our last poll, understanding of the proposed system itself remained low. In fact, even after the election, only 15% of respondents felt 'very informed' about STV.

So why did people vote yes? In our post election poll (June 5, 2005) we asked voters who voted in the referendum why they voted 'yes' or 'no' in an open ended format. These questions yielded some keen insights into the motivations behind the ballots cast. In particular, those who supported STV were more likely to do so because of a general appetite for change rather than the specific merits of the proposal.

Why, specifically, did you vote in favour of STV?



PERCENT OF BC VOTERS THAT FELT 'SOMEWHAT' AND 'VERY' INFORMED ABOUT STV



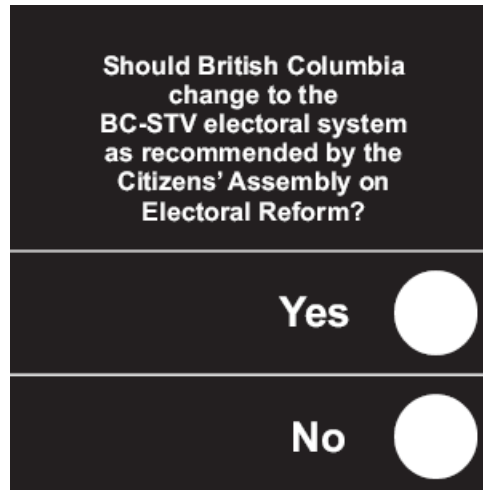
In fact, out of those who voted in favour of STV - only 21% felt 'very informed' about the system. Again, this indicates that voters were voting for some kind of change in general, but not this particular proposal. Conversely, the 'no' voters said they simply didn't know enough about it. This post-election survey confirmed what our data suggested - better communications were required by the 'yes' side to alleviate opposition and shore up support.

In total, NRG conducted four polls on STV and we found that those who felt 'very' informed about the issue went up by only 10 points during the campaign. Even post-election, only 53% of voters felt at all informed. This data - juxtaposed with the referendum results - suggests a correlation between feeling informed and supporting the proposal. It begs the question, 'had STV been better communicated to the electorate would it have passed?' Without an effective communication effort the referendum almost did pass. This question, however, is difficult to answer since greater communications by both sides in the debate could have influenced the results in either direction.

Was the Ballot Question Biased?

As British Columbians went to the polls on May 17, only a handful of voters felt they had a very good understanding of how STV worked and what its implications would be if implemented. This

lack of voter knowledge of STV makes the structure of the ballot question all the more important. Anyone who has followed previous referenda votes (e.g., Quebec sovereignty in 1980 and 1995, First Nations in BC in 2001) knows how contentious the issue of referendum question wording becomes. This is because even subtle changes in the wording of any question can dramatically change the outcome.



This is the ballot question that voters were presented with: 'Should British Columbia change to the BC-STV electoral system as recommended by the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform?'

To the average voter - particularly the average uninformed voter - the reference to the Citizens' Assembly

sounds like an endorsement by a panel of experts. It is quite possible that many voters reacted to this question by asking themselves: "Well, if this Citizens' Assembly recommends it, why shouldn't I endorse it?" The power of peripheral cues like expert endorsements to influence people under conditions of uncertainty is not lost on those selling political change - and it is certainly not lost on those selling consumer products. "Will you chew Trident gum, as recommended by two out of three dentists?"

We can only wonder how the referendum vote would have turned out if voters were simply asked: "Should British Columbia change to the

BC-STV electoral system?" (And if a "don't know" category was added to the 'yes' and 'no' response options, things would have really changed!)

Communication Challenges

While it is not yet known how much money was spent on the respective 'yes' and 'no' campaigns - BC Elections will report on this in the fall once the filings are in. We can estimate that it was a paltry sum compared to the dollars spent on the political campaigns. Relying on blogs, emails, town hall meetings, and a province-wide mailing isn't nearly enough to inform, much less educate, the electorate.

In the end, we were able to explain the STV referendum using a simple model. Take a disgruntled electorate, a complex system poorly communicated, and biased referendum question and what do you get? A near miss.

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Note: Research findings were drawn from a random telephone survey of 806 British Columbians conducted between May 31 and June 5, 2005. This study was part of NRG Research Group's monthly omnibus - Ask BC. Overall results have a margin of error of +/- 3.5%, 19 times out of 20.

About NRG Research Group

NRG Research Group is a leading North American market and public opinion research company with offices in Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg and Toronto, and associated offices in Montreal, Halifax and the US.

NRG offers qualitative and quantitative research services as well as communications and public affairs consultation.

NRG was formed in 2005 from the merger of Western Opinion Research and Nordic Research Group.

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