

Why BC-STV Failed
(or Felix's view on the subject, anyway)
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DRAFT

Foreword

In 2005, we voted on a new electoral system proposed by the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform. As the 2001 provincial election had resulted in one party taking all but two seats with only 57% of the vote, perhaps it's not surprising that the referendum nearly passed. With that embarrassing malfunction of First Past the Post still fresh on everyone's minds, a "yes" vote to electoral reform was just common sense.

The result was astounding, and very hopeful for BC-STV: were it not for the unusual 60% pass threshold set by the government, the 57% and all but two ridings (a strange coincidence) who voted in favour would have gotten their wish.

So why then, when the same referendum was run again in 2009, did it fail so utterly and abysmally?

The Campaigns

The difference between the 2005 and 2009 referenda lies here and so, I believe, does the reason for the failure in 2009. Prior to the 2009 referendum, "yes" and "no" campaigns were set up and provided with \$500 000 each. Those campaigns were each free to use whatever means they wanted to convince the public of their point of view.

As with any political issue, when there are campaigns involved the merit of the actual issue at hand is largely irrelevant. All that matters to a majority of voters is which campaign is better able to reach and resonate with them.

The campaigns were, of course, each run by people who believed strongly in their message. The "yes" side comprised people committed to electoral reform and who believed that BC-STV was the best system for BC; the "no" side comprised people who (for the most part) believed that the current system was fine and feared that BC-STV would introduce serious problems.

Unfortunately, those points of view were not independent of the personality types of the people who held them, and this, I believe, is ultimately responsible for the "no" side's victory.

Following are several of the key differences in the campaigns and their proponents.

1. Advertising media

The “yes” campaign's advertising consisted of word of mouth, public information meetings, presentations, election simulations, debates, signs, t-shirts, buttons, organized letters to the editor, and a spiffy website with prominent discussion forums and a donation form.

In stark contrast, all the “no” side did was run paid TV, radio, and newspaper ads. There were no “No to STV” signs. No public meetings. No one wore “I **don't** support BC-STV” buttons. The “no STV” website was minimal and did not solicit donations. The anti-STV editorials and letters were probably organized, but in a different way from the “yes” side.

They were mostly written by crabby old men who wish that the hippies would leave them alone and let them spray herbicides on their lawns in peace. These men are the sorts who are proud to be close friends with the conservative politicians, whom the hippies are afraid to even approach because of the intimidating amounts of carbon they burn through. The coordination of the editorials they wrote consisted only of a well-placed gripe about STV now and then under the chandelier in the dining room.

But digressions aside, there is an important distinction here: all of those grass-roots methods used by the “yes” side reached only a small minority of voters.

Word of mouth only works if your believers will talk to the people who need convincing – but as I've illustrated, that's unlikely.

Only people who are interested or who really care about an issue will attend a public meeting about it, and then only if they are the rare sort of person who attends public meetings.

Signs and buttons are only read by the literate, and only a small subset at that. And no one except the criminally indecisive ever have their political opinions changed by signs.

Newspapers are a terminally obsolete medium to the vast majority of the electorate now, for the simple reason that to enjoy them one must be willing to read not just one, but several consecutive sentences.

The TV ads were what won this campaign. It's as simple as that. The “no” side's strategy was brilliant: TV can reach a solid majority of voters; it is the one medium that they all have. TV does not discriminate based on literacy, intelligence, geography, or even interest. TV can do all of those things that word of mouth, public meetings, signs, buttons, shirts, and newspapers can't.

It can do that because TV assumes a fundamentally different thing about people: all of the things that the “yes” side did assume that people are intelligent individuals who will make a good choice when presented with relevant information. TV assumes that people are inherently disinterested in most things and that they would (at least subconsciously) prefer to have decisions made for them whenever possible.

These two approaches are each correct for a subset of the electorate, but the latter subset is much bigger. It is the latter subset that determines the outcome of elections, and it is the latter subset that not only makes campaigns work but drives their very existence.

If all voters were intelligent, interested, decision-making individuals, election advertising of the sort we see now would be largely ineffectual. There would be no point in publically stating that your party is committed to the environment when your platform says you'll sell Vancouver Island to a logging company, or in saying that your party is an independent voice for everyone when your large donations are from trade unions. The voters would already know those things and either ignore you or call you out.

But most voters do not read. Most voters will vote for whomever does the best job of wooing them (or scaring them). Actual facts are largely irrelevant – if the TV tells them that BC-STV is complicated, the subtext is “look; we've done all the hard work of pondering this for you, and our conclusion is that it's too complicated for you,” and that's enough to produce a “no” vote. This is especially true if the TV never says another word about BC-STV because to find out about the “yes” side, you have to read.

The “yes” side did realize this, eventually. But by that time the campaign was well underway and they had already spent all their money on signs and public meetings and a snazzy website. There was an almost panicked call for extra donations, so that a TV ad defense could be mounted, but it was too late. Even when the “yes” ads ran, they were still outnumbered by the more skilfully written “no” ads.

2. The Websites

The “no STV” website looked like something from 1998; it may well have been constructed only because the “no” campaign was required to have a website. By looking the way it did, conveyed two important subtexts: “our website isn't important” and “we don't need your money.” That alone conveys a huge amount of confidence in the status quo.

The “yes” website on the other hand prominently soliticted donations and it clearly took a lot of work to set up. The “yes” side was saying that to overcome the status quo would require large amounts of money and effort – the message wasn't “BC-STV is so much better than the current system we don't even have to convince you;” it was closer to, “please, listen to us; if you'll let us explain this to you we're sure you'll agree.” I'm sure someone who works in marketing can explain how unlikely that position is to succeed.

The political parties

3. Avoidance and outright opposition

The entire process that lead to BC-STV was instigated by the Liberal Party after the 2001 election. Consequently, many Liberal Party supporters may have seen that as an endorsement during the 2005 referendum.

This time, both major parties stayed well clear of STV, both looking as if they were avoiding the issue with all their might. The NDP even spoke out against it. The NDP endorsed Mixed Member Proportional, and said that they could not support BC-STV at all. Consequently, many NDP supporters voted “no” automatically.

It's likely that many Liberal supporters did the same thing – they could easily have seen the party's staunch avoidance of the topic as being a polite way to distance themselves from something they had created, but which had since lost favour.

The NDP's position is confusing, and somewhat surprising. They must have known that defeating BC-STV would close the issue of electoral reform for a long time to come, and that getting Mixed Member Proportional stood a better chance of succeeding had BC-STV passed.

However, the first duty of any political party in our current system is to get elected. The NDP could not simultaneously encourage electoral reform (which would get rid of strategic voting) *and* encourage supporters of other parties to vote strategically for them. This election was very important to the BC NDP (of course, *any* election is very important).

They wanted so badly to form the government *this* time as opposed to doing it in the next election, which could have been conducted under BC-STV, that they traded that long-sighted possibility for the short-sighted one of getting elected now, at any cost.

I believe that if the Citizens' Assembly had recommended MMP, the NDP's position right now would be that they couldn't support it, and favoured STV instead, for the same short-term tradeoff. Besides (they probably reasoned), if they got elected they could always implement Mixed Member Proportional themselves.

The BC-STV system itself

4. Twenty giant ridings

This aspect of BC-STV was, plain and simple, a big mistake. If anything, our growing population, large geographic area, and diversity of opinion demand *more* ridings, not fewer.

Unfortunately, this condition was forced on the Citizens' Assembly – when recommending a new system, they were not allowed to increase the number of representatives. Since BC-STV needs multiple representatives elected to each riding, the only solution was to increase the size of the ridings.

Realistically, having only twenty ridings with multiple MLA's in each would not have changed the situation of most voters: the majority of northern residents would still have to travel obscenely long distances to reach their representative, and the majority of city residents would still be able to reach theirs on foot.

However, when the best outcome was only equivalent to the status quo, it was easy for the “no” side to convince voters that their situation could get worse under BC-STV. It was difficult for the “yes” side to refute that.

(My own theory on why the number of MLA's was not allowed to increase: the provincial legislature is a heritage building, so it cannot be renovated to contain more seats.)

5. Counting complexity

There is no doubt that BC-STV's vote counting system is more complex than First Past the Post. But just how much more complex is it? First, I will try to explain First Past the Post from memory:

- A number of candidates run in a constituency, one of whom is to be elected.
- On election day, each voter chooses the candidate that they feel best represents their interests and marks an X next to their name on a ballot.
- After voting is complete, the votes are counted to see which candidate has the greatest number of ballots with an X next to their name.
- The candidate with the greatest number of votes wins.

Now, I will try to do the same thing for BC-STV:

- A number of candidates run in a constituency, several of whom are to be elected.
- On election day, each voter ranks the candidates by putting a number next to their names on the ballot, with 1 being the candidate the voter would most like to see elected.
- After voting is complete, a threshold is set equal to the number of ballots cast divided by the number of candidates to be elected plus one, plus one vote.
- All voters' first choices are then counted. If any candidates have more "1" votes than the threshold, they are declared elected.
- For each of the candidates that are elected, surplus votes are calculated and transferred. This is done by taking the total number of "1" votes the candidate got, subtracting the threshold, then dividing the surplus votes according to the proportions of "2" votes in that candidate's entire set of "1" votes.
- If after that transfer any other candidates crossed the threshold, they are declared elected and the transfer process is repeated for each of them.
- If after a transfer no other candidates have crossed the threshold, eliminate the candidate with the lowest number of votes, and transfer those votes according to their "2" choices.
- Repeat the transfer/elimination process as many times as needed to elect the correct number of candidates.

Having worked on the "yes" campaign, I am arguably much more familiar with the system than most voters. However, I know that I have missed some things in my description, and I cannot remember how they work. Namely:

- How does one divide surplus votes after the first transfer round? Does one need to go back to the original source candidate's votes and calculate the "3" proportions from their entire set of ballots, or does one only calculate the proportions of "2" votes from the transfer recipient (ignoring the votes transferred from the first candidate)?
- What happens if there are not enough transferrable votes to elect the full

number of candidates needed (e.g. everyone only marks "1" for the first candidate)?

And some oddball questions coming from my experience as a computer programmer:

- Is a ballot that contains the sequence "1, 2, X, 4" considered spoiled entirely, or is it counted in rounds 1, 2, not 3, and 4?
- What happens if counting is done with elimination transfers only (as opposed to alternating between surplus transfer, elimination transfer)?
- Is it ever possible to elect too many candidates?

If I were working for the "no" side I would say, "I rest my case." In fact, the BC-STV system *is* too complicated for the average voter to understand easily. There are two important qualifiers in that sentence: "the average voter" and "understand easily." I do believe that almost any human being without serious brain damage is capable of understanding the BC-STV counting method. However, I also believe that for all but a small minority, several moments of mental effort would be required.

Saying "it's too complicated" and voting "no" requires no mental effort, which is what a large proportion of voters did.

And from some points of view, they have a very good point: such a fundamental piece of our democracy *should* be simple enough that the village idiot could count the votes reliably without the aid of a computer.

(BC-STV supporters, myself among them, would argue that the benefit of representing voter intentions more accurately is paramount, and comes before the simplicity of the system.)

The Citizens' Assembly

The Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform is a fascinating and wonderful concept. It was a randomly chosen set of men and women from all across the province. It was a representative sample, a cross section, of BC's entire population. It contained average people.

This set of people was tasked to examine what had gone wrong with our electoral system, and to research alternatives, and finally to make a recommendation: keep the current system, or is there something better?

Unfortunately, a set of average people cannot survive a task like that and still be a representative sample of average people. It is true that human beings are all very intelligent, reasonable, rational, individual beings. It is also true that these traits are much more visible and expressive if they have been cultivated by learning. It is, unfortunately, also true that in a default majority of human beings in our society, these traits have gone largely *uncultivated*.

The Citizens' Assembly on Electoral reform may have begun as a random sample of average people, but after their task was complete they were no longer average. Whether they realized it or not, spending several months researching makes one educated.

It is my strong belief that a significant portion of the Assembly did not realize this when they voted to recommend BC-STV. That is the only ready explanation for their recommendation of a system as complex as BC-STV was.

As I mentioned earlier, BC-STV is *not* too complicated for the average person to understand. It is understandable, and relatively easily so – but the same is true of a VCR manual. It is a well known fact that well over 60% of VCR's display 12:00 permanently because the average voter does not read the manual. The average voter never even opens the manual.

Trying to get such a populus to understand BC-STV en masse is next to impossible. The person or entity able to effect such a change in our society would not use it for a mere electoral system. If it were possible to explain a concept near BC-STV's complexity to a majority of people within the space of one month, we would not be in the middle of a climate crisis right now.

The only way I can see this having escaped the members of the Citizens' Assembly is that those average, everyday people thought that they were still average, everyday people. They must have looked at the BC-STV flowchart and thought, "Hey, I'm just an average person; I don't even have a college education; if I can *design* something like this, of course my neighbours will have no problem understanding it!"

There are two great tragedies here. The first is that the Citizens' Assembly failed to realize how complex BC-STV would seem to the average person. The second is that the Citizens' Assembly has demonstrated that average people are inherently intelligent, but that the majority of British Columbians remain as they are, with that intelligence lying dormant.

Conclusion

If there was this much wrong with BC-STV, how did it ever achieve close to 60% support before? I am loathe to say it, but in my opinion the only reason it was so popular is that there were no campaigns last time. No one knew what it was. The 2001 election was fresh in everyone's minds, and that was all they thought of when they saw the words "electoral reform" on the ballot. So they voted "yes" – "It had to be better than what we had in 2001, right?" "Hey, it was created by citizens; that has to be good."

This year, most voters went to the polls with the "no" side's TV ads fresh in their minds. For many of them the "no" ads were all they saw on the issue. "Only twenty ridings, for all of BC? No, I can't say yes to that." "I don't even remember how it works, and I looked it up on their website – most people wouldn't even do that, so it's too complicated."

Even so, I think BC-STV could have passed. It would have required another year or two of study by the Citizens' Assembly, though – once you've become more intelligent than average, the only way to convince average people of your point of view is to study marketing. If the Citizens' Assembly had spent time on sabbatical trailing politicians, used car salespeople, and fashion designers after they reached their decision, I whole-heartedly believe the referendum would have passed.

That's what we need to do next time.