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The 2005 and 2009 Referenda on Voting System Change in British Columbia

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Abstract

British Columbia's two referenda on its voting system produced dramatically different results. Conventional accounts of the events tend to rely on populism to explain the surprisingly high vote for the single transferable vote option in 2005 and public concern about the workings of this proposed alternative to explain the decline in its support in 2009. But as public knowledge about the referendum choices remained low in both cases it is hard to credit public reactions to the voting system options as a key factor influencing the results. A more critical reading of the events and existing academic survey work on both referenda suggest that elite manipulation of the process and changing levels of partisan insecurity between the two votes were more influential in producing these different outcomes.

Introduction[2]

British Columbia's two referenda on voting system reform can be seen to bookend the recent surge of interest in voting methods in Canada at the provincial level. Between the province's first vote in 2005 and the second in 2009, two other provinces held referenda on the same issue, while another two developed sophisticated processes to consider it. Even the federal parliament seemed to consider taking it up near the end of Paul Martin's minority Liberal government in 2005. British Columbia's experience has been characterized as influential in all these cases for a number of reasons. First, as would be the case elsewhere, reform appeared to gain traction in British Columbia initially as a result of a series of anomalous election results, combined with rising public concern over falling levels of citizen engagement, particularly amongst youth. Then the province's adoption of a distinctive 'citizens' assembly' model to deliberate over and possibly design voting system alternatives gained widespread positive coverage, spawning imitators across the country and internationally. Finally, the surprising

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results in the first referendum in 2005 – nearly 58% of voters favoured change – suggested a popular appetite for reform that conventional elites would seemingly ignore at their peril. Commentators routinely spoke of when – not if – reform would come.

Yet by the time British Columbia's second referendum on the voting system was held in May 2009 the populist revolt that appeared to breaking across the provinces in 2005 had noticeably waned. Similar voting system referenda in Prince Edward Island and Ontario had produced 60%+ majorities for the status quo, while electoral reform processes in other provinces and at the federal level had been abandoned. As British Columbia's second vote approached, some hoped that the province's alleged penchant for populist politics might allow it to buck the trend of institutional conservatism witnessed elsewhere in the country. After the 2005 near loss Gordon Gibson had made just this argument, i.e. that the province had a unique culture and that "B.C. voters aren't reform-averse, like Ontario's" (Gibson, *Globe and Mail*, May 27, 2005). But the second referendum vote essentially reversed the first – with nearly 61% of those voting now choosing 'the existing system' instead of the proposed alternative, the single transferable vote (STV) form of proportional representation.

How should we approach explaining these dramatically different results? Popular accounts often invoke British Columbia's allegedly distinctive populist political culture to explain the majority vote for the STV option in 2005 and rising levels of public concern about how this new system might work in practice to explain the failure of the reform option to reproduce this support in 2009. But academic survey work appears to support only the former view, and then only to a limited degree as populist views amongst the public can account for only some of the 2005 support. In fact, both academic and commercial survey work has highlighted how public knowledge about the referendum choices remained low in both cases, making it is hard to credit public reactions to the voting system options as a key factor influencing the results. Yet there is more we need to factor in here to understand these referenda in British Columbia. First, a more critical reading of the events in British Columbia, particularly when cast against the recent voting system referenda experience in other provinces, suggests that elite manipulation of the process had a crucial impact on the result. Second, a different reading of the existing survey work would highlight how changing levels of partisan insecurity between the two votes were more influential in producing these different outcomes than populism.

For instance, though credited by many with inaugurating the recent reform era, it could be argued that British Columbia's most influential contributions to the recent spate of voting system reform deliberations were primarily conservative and defensive. With the benefit of hindsight one can trace how the provincial governing elites came up with numerous innovative ways to structure the reform process to create barriers against change, while the conventional political elites modeled how to trump such populist reform initiatives without appearing self-interested. Ultimately, over the course of the four referenda – from British Columbia to Prince Edward Island to Ontario and back – a process of policy-learning appeared to be going on as the various provincial governing and political elites added new twists picked up from each preceding campaign to help ensure defeat of the referenda. At the same time, the voting system reform issue emerged at a time when both political elites and their voters found themselves unsure about the direction of the province's party system and their place within it. Partisan insecurity

would see many voters ignore the muted opposition of their leaders to reform in 2005 but fall in line in 2009 (particularly Liberals) when it seemed that the traditional left-right party dualism in the province had been restored.

Backdrop

As the new century began, the consensus across different jurisdictions in Canada that voting system reform should be a key part of democratic reform discussions and a larger project of re-engaging citizens was striking. Liberals in British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec all successfully campaigned in provincial elections with a commitment to a public process that would examine how their citizens vote. Meanwhile Conservatives in Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick turned to voting system reform as a possible solution to a series of lopsided elections results that often denied the opposition any meaningful presence in their legislatures, despite nearly 40% of the vote. At the same time, federally, the Law Commission of Canada published an influential report calling for some form of proportional voting for national elections as well (Seidle 2002).

In British Columbia, many trace the roots of the voting system commitments on the part of the Liberals to the anomalous provincial election result in 1996 where the governing New Democratic Party (NDP) won re-election despite gaining 3% fewer votes than their opponents. Many influential Liberal party activists blamed the voting system for this perverse result and worked to commit the party to reforming the rules to prevent such a result from happening in the future (Ruff 2004; 236-8). Then, the lopsided victory for the Liberals in 2001 – the party won 77 of 79 seats with 57% of the popular vote – convinced many outside the party that the voting system in British Columbia was extreme, unreliable, and unrepresentative. For many researchers, these back-to-back extreme elections, along with a general concern about declining public interest and confidence in conventional politics, were the key reasons British Columbia took up voting system reform (Carty, Blais and Fournier 2008; 141-2).

But there is more to the story than these two perverse electoral outcomes and a general sense of public indifference to politics. In fact, British Columbia has had a long dalliance with voting system reform initiatives. And these campaigns have had less to do with lopsided election results or public opinion than the ideological divisions that traditionally define the provincial election contests (for a concise review of these many initiatives, see Pilon 2010). For instance, municipal voting system reform campaigns have come to Vancouver whenever leftwing political forces appeared to be on the rise e.g. after WWI, in the 1930s, or from the 1970s on. Provincially, the only successful reform – the adoption of the majoritarian alternative vote – occurred in the early 1950s when the centre-right political forces worried that the main left wing party might 'go up the middle' and take power. And these political forces have returned to discussions of voting system reforms whenever they feared that they might be shut out of power for any amount of time (e.g. the 1970s and the 1990s). What this suggests is that the provincial Liberals may have taken up voting system reform in opposition in the late 1990s more

for ideological and self-interested reasons, rather than principled ones. However, when the party won power in 2001, they faced a classic political problem. Though they had campaigned on democratic reform, their victory meant that many in the party were no longer interested in carrying them out.

An assumption of Liberal government ambivalence on democratic reform goes a lot further in explaining their subsequent actions than the more common view that the Campbell government merely introduced the policy commitments they campaigned on. After all, despite the Premier's stated commitments, government decisions on the issue appeared to take a back seat to the party's neoliberal economic policies, at least during their first year in office. In the interim, the British Columbia Green party attempted to use the provincial initiative referendum process to force a vote on proportional representation in 2001-02, and though it failed it did keep the issue before the public.

The government did finally act in September 2002, appointing former provincial Liberal leader Gordon Gibson to design a process for a 'citizens' assembly' to examine the provincial voting system. His suggestions were delivered in December and eventually implemented by the Campbell Liberals. But every step in process – working out Assembly rules, passing the necessary legislation, selecting the assembly members – seemed to take additional six months to materialize. In the end, the 160 member British Columbia Citizens' Assembly (BC-CA) only finally convened in January of 2004 (Ruff 2004; 238). Their report in December of that year called for British Columbia to replace its all-or-nothing single member plurality (SMP) system with a form of proportional representation called STV. Both during and after their deliberations, the BC-CA became seen as a model of citizen engagement, widely praised and recommended elsewhere (for detailed analyses of many aspects of the BC-CA process, e.g. its design, selection, and deliberations process, see various contributions to Warren and Pearse 2008). And, as promised, the Premier agreed to put the recommendation of the BC-CA to the people of the province in referendum that would coincide with the provincial election scheduled for May 2005.

While many credit Campbell with keeping his promise and supporting the BC-CA and its result (Mickleburgh, *Globe and Mail*, August 2, 2003; Palmer, *Vancouver Sun*, May 11, 2005), a clear pattern of indifference and/or obstruction can be gleaned from his government's decisions on a number of key decisions affecting the process. The first problem, outlined above, involved endless delays in getting the process started. In the end, Campbell had waited so long that by the time the BC-CA decision came down, there was just six months left to publicize it. Then his government refused to spend a serious amount of money to promote the results or inform the public about the substance of the issue that they would need to vote on. This seemed like a case of false economy at best, or obstruction at worst. After spending $5.5 million on the BC-CA process, the Liberals allocated just $800,000 for advertising and communication connected with the referendum. (Ratner 2008; 145-6) Finally, the Liberals clearly stacked the deck against any change occurring by establishing a super-majority threshold – 60% of the popular vote across the province and majority approval in at least 60% of the ridings – for the STV option to be chosen, despite the fact that there existed no compelling legal or historical precedents for doing so (Pilon 2007; 103-4). While some Canadian scholars argue that these measures were not

deliberately designed to ensure defeat (Carty, Blais and Fournier 2008; 144, 157), more comparative accounts tend to characterize these decisions as a strategy of "process manipulation" by the politicians (Renwick 2010; 77). Needless to say, with such barriers in place, the odds against reform were higher than the any of the Premier's fans realized.

2005 Referendum and Aftermath

The campaign over British Columbia's voting system effectively started with the announcement of the BC-CA's preference for a proportional system called STV in late October 2004. Though STV was historically used extensively in Canada at the provincial and municipal level (Pilon 2006), commentators mostly highlighted how the proposed alternative to British Columbia's traditional first-past-the-post system was little used internationally, with only Ireland and Malta using the system for national elections. Citizens' assembly designer Gordon Gibson quickly lauded their decision in the national *Globe and Mail*, claiming it heralded a "new kind of democracy" (Gibson, *Globe and Mail*, November 1, 2004). But, on the whole, the *Globe* was not as impressed. In fact, with headlines like "Single transferable nonsense," "Hands up if you've mastered the STV," and "STV will be very, very bad for Canada," the paper modeled what would become the three most common media responses to new voting system proposals: mockery, complexity or chaos. Right-wing pundit Norman Spector dismissed STV as a 'Rube Goldberg voting system' (Spector, *Globe and Mail*, January 10, 2005). Columnist John Ibbitson complained it was confusing (Ibbitson, *Globe and Mail*, November 3, 2004). National affairs writer Jeffrey Simpson argued that STV would prevent politicians from taking unpopular decisions (Simpson, *Globe and Mail*, November 19, 2004). Provincial media seemed more sympathetic, praising the BC-CA for their efforts and calling for a serious public consideration of their model (e.g. Winterhoff, *Saanich News*, November 17, 2004). In British Columbia at least, the positive glow surrounding the Citizens' Assembly seemed to temper any immediate attacks on their proposal.

But after the initial flush of coverage following the BC-CA's announcement the voting system referendum sank from view, reappearing sporadically only as a kind of novelty story. An early February poll conducted by Ipsos Reid found 50% of respondents aware of the upcoming referendum but two-thirds of them claimed to know "very little" or "nothing" about BC-STV (Ipsos Reid, February 21, 2005). Mid-campaign polls found that the situation was hardly improving as the percentage of respondents reporting "don't know/undecided" to questions about their referendum voting intention remained above 50% (Angus Reid, April 24, 2005; May 2, 2005). A *Globe and Mail* sponsored survey conducted by Strategic Council in April 2005 found nearly half of their respondents knew "nothing at all" about STV, 42% claimed to know "a little," and only 10% thought they knew "a lot" about it (Stueck, *Globe and Mail*, May 9, 2005; Angus Reid, April 25, 2005). While Angus Reid measured an improvement in the final weeks of the campaign (Angus Reid, May 15, 2005), Ipsos Reid actually registered a decline in voter knowledge over the same period, with the percentage of respondents claiming to know "nothing" or "very little" about BC-STV increasing from 64 to 66% (Ipsos Reid, April 30, 2005; May 14, 2005). Though their questions varied, making direct comparisons problematic, the polling results all painted a similar portrait of public opinion: the public seemed only vaguely aware of the referendum and poorly informed on what was at stake in making their decision.

There were some efforts to inform the public. Elections BC established an information hotline, updated their website, and took out some media advertizing, but this focused mostly on raising awareness that a referendum was to take place, not what the referendum was about. To educate voters on the electoral system debate, the government created a Referendum Information Office, which created its own website, fact-sheets, and information hotline, and they mailed a brochure about the issue to every household in the province (Elections BC 2005a; pp. 5-6). Needless to say, given the general tenor of the various public opinion survey results, neither effort was effective. Indeed, the brochures from the Referendum Information Office resembled newspaper advertizing inserts and likely passed directly to most voters' recycling boxes unopened. A post election assessment by province's chief electoral officer noted how declined and rejected ballot totals for the referendum were significantly higher than the general election, a result he suggested "may reflect a general discomfort among the electorate with their level of understanding of the new electoral process." The report also cited a Nordic Research survey conducted after the referendum that found over half of those that voted against STV claimed they did so because they did not feel "knowledgeable" (Elections BC 2005b; 38).

Two loosely organized groups did form to attempt to fill the information void and give the referendum a campaign-like dynamic. YES-STV gathered together most of the former BC-CA members under the organizational leadership of Fair Voting BC, the local voting reform advocacy group, as well as activists from Fair Vote Canada, a few sympathetic academics, and some celebrity supporters. While they had little money, the group had considerable knowledge of their topic, though not all members were equally effective in conveying it to a general audience (Pilon 2007; 173, 175). A hastily assembled KNOW STV group formed early in 2005 to oppose the change, comprising a few former politicians, backroom operatives from both the major provincial parties, and two disgruntled members of the BC-CA. YES-STV tried to operate a grassroots campaign where local BC-CA members would host a public meeting but results were mixed and coverage was poor. KNOW STV used its political connections and savvy to position itself as the opposing voice in the campaign for media calls, debates and op/eds but it struggled against appearing self-interested and the generally popular sentiment for the BC-CA members. To the extent the issue got any coverage, reports of the referendum or the STV proposal were often linked to a positive assessment of the BC-CA (for instance, see Hall, *Vancouver Sun*, May 6, 2005). In such light, KNOW STV struggled to highlight what it saw as the negatives of STV without appearing churlish and 'anti-citizen'. Indeed, attempts to play on fears of change by suggesting STV might lead to unstable results only brought to mind province's own perverse election results in 1996 and 2001.

Part of the problem of poor coverage for the referendum vote was that none of the major parties would be drawn publicly into the debate. Premier Campbell said he would remain neutral out of respect for the citizens and their hard work in the BC-CA, with most of the Liberal caucus doing the same. Carole James and the NDP had made no secret of their disdain for STV but they too refused to make it a campaign issue. Surprisingly, provincial Green party leader Adrienne Carr had also condemned STV, suggesting she preferred a different version of proportional representation instead (Pilon 2007; 98; Massicotte 2008; 158). Even British Columbia's miniscule Communist Party came out against STV (People's Voice 2005). Of course,

to say that the parties did not campaign on the issue is not to suggest they were neutral or above more indirect messaging on the topic. Many Green candidates ignored their leader and openly supported the YES STV campaign. As a party, the Liberals were largely opposed to changing the voting system. Indeed, the addition of a super-majority rule to the referendum process accompanying the BC-CA was widely interpreted as a necessary concession by Campbell to the strong opposition within his cabinet to raising the issue at all (Ruff 2004; 240). The NDP had committed in 1999 to adopting proportional representation provincially but, like the Greens, claimed to prefer a different model than STV. In reality, the party was deeply split on whether voting system reform was a good idea, with a number of important union leaders and Members of the Legislative Assembly against any form of proportional representation, despite party policy (for a brief treatment of some of these issues, see BC NDP 2001; 22-3). Thus while both Liberal and NDP campaigns officially took no stand on the referendum, reports of doorstep campaigns indicated that various anti-STV messages were being conveyed.

Still, without strongly articulated positions from the parties in the daily media, voters who tended to use their party's position on issues as a guide effectively got no direction on the referendum. Nor did the issue appear to split on a standard left-right axis. Both YES-STV and KNOW-STV featured supporters that stretched from left to right. KNOW-STV issued a press release condemning STV signed by former NDP Premier Dave Barrett and former Social Credit Premier Bill Bennett (Ward, *Vancouver Sun*, May 6, 2005). YES-STV responded with a press conference that featured an endorsement supported by right-wing radio host Rafe Mair, environmentalist David Suzuki, and leftwing Vancouver city councilor Fred Bass (Chu, *Vancouver Sun*, May 9, 2005). Vancouver's left-wing entertainment weekly the *Georgia Straight* condemned STV and urged its defeat to protect the poor (*Georgia Straight*, May 12, 2005), while Victoria's left-wing entertainment weekly praised STV as an opportunity to change the province's voting habits and urged its passage (Gordaneer, *Monday Magazine*, March 30, 2005). The Vancouver Board of Trade condemned STV as bad for business while populist right-winger and former Reform party leader Preston Manning praised STV as a great citizen-oriented reform (Bailey, *The Province*, May 13, 2005; Boei, *Vancouver Sun*, May 14, 2005). Voters seeking clear ideological direction on the issue would find none.

Late election polling suggested that the public were still not very aware of the referendum or very knowledgeable about the STV proposal specifically (Bailey, *The Province*, May 13, 2005), with one poll reporting that 66% of respondents still claimed to know "nothing/very little" about STV (Boei, *Vancouver Sun*, May 14, 2005). Despite this, surveys completed just days before the referendum vote suggested that a majority were favouring the BC-CA proposed STV system, though a considerable number were still undecided or had no opinion. Some high profile media, like the *Vancouver Sun* and few high profile columnists (Michael Smyth, *The Province*, May 1, 2005; Paul Willcocks, *Vancouver Sun*, May 14, 2005), eventually endorsed STV, largely on the basis of the case made by the BC-CA. As the *Sun* editorial page put it in a column entitled 'The Newspaper's View', "The *Vancouver Sun* thinks it's worth putting our faith in the Citizens' Assembly and giving STV a try" (Editorial, *Vancouver Sun*, May 7, 2005). Yet there were many others who remained opposed and counseled defeat of the proposal, including the *Globe* editorial board (May 3, 2005), *Globe* columnist Jeffrey Simpson (May 17, 2005), regular *Sun* columnists Stephen Hume and Pete McMartin (May 11 and 14), and Norman Spector, who was

given a platform in both the *Globe* and the *Sun* (May 13, 2005, May 16, 2005). Still, given what appeared to be widespread public indifference to the whole issue, many opponents anticipated that a bewildered public would simply vote it down on election day, a response that studies of referenda confirms is fairly typical when people are asked to decide to on things they know nothing about (Christin, Hug and Sciarini 2003).

On election day nearly 58% of British Columbia's voters endorsed the Citizens' Assembly's proposal to replace the province's traditional voting system, first past the post, with STV. Immediately a new debate emerged about how to respond to the result. The Liberals had set the threshold to pass at 60%, which left the result 3% shy of victory. But given that the Liberals themselves had won 77 of 79 seats in the legislature in 2001 with 57% of the vote, for the referendum to lose with 57% seemed curious. Indeed, the just-elected government that would decide what to do on a referendum with 57% of the vote had themselves secured only 46% of the vote. Gordon Campbell did not lack for advice in the days that followed. Citizen's assembly designer Gordon Gibson argued that the government should simply introduce the change because "there is simply no question of where British Columbians stand on this reform. They want it." As such, he believed the "legislature should just pass this reform and get on with it" (Gibson, *Globe and Mail*, May 27, 2005). This echoed the views of YES STV and the most of the country's democratic reform groups. But others, like the NDP and the *Globe* editorial board, claimed the vote was a loss and that British Columbia should go back to drawing board and try again (Editorial, *Globe and Mail*, May 20, 2005). Other critics were more dismissive, complaining that voter turnout was low and that voters did not understand what they were voting for (Simpson, *Globe and Mail*, May 21, 2005; Spector, *Globe and Mail*, May 30, 2005).

Post-election analysis of academic surveys conducted during the referendum campaign told a more complicated story. The study confirmed that most people knew little about the details about STV, though for those that did get informed, they were more likely to support it. But for the rest of those voting "yes" the decision appeared to rely on a positive perception of the BC-CA and their work (Cutler et al 2008). While *Globe and Mail* columnist Jeffery Simpson dismissed the positive vote as a rather dismissive populist rant against the existing political class (Simpson, *Globe and Mail*. May 21, 2005), the academic surveys suggested that voters had responded to the BC-CA with a more positive kind of populism, one that identified with the idea that the STV proposal had been designed and recommended by their fellow citizens (Cutler et al 2008). Some argued that the 2005 question wording encouraged this identification as STV had been 'recommended' by the BC-CA. Indeed, assembly members themselves crafted the question to call attention to the source of the proposal – fellow citizens. Yet it is hard to disentangle this populism from the other influences that may have influenced the vote, like party allegiances. While party elites in both the Liberals and NDP seemed opposed to STV, their voters were more open to considering it. For instance, the research also underlined the considerable cross-party support for change, with only slightly more NDPers voting 'yes to STV' than Liberals (Carty, Cutler and Fournier 2009). This is another important, often overlooked angle to the surprising referendum result. Though many credit the province's populist political character for embracing reform, the aftermath of the 1996 and 2001 elections had left many partisans in the province unsure about their party's future and arguably open to reform ideas.

If nothing else, the research underlined how poorly the public education process carried out by Elections BC had worked over the course of the referendum and alternatively the inability of YES-STV and KNOW-STV campaigns or the media to act as effective grassroots educators either (on public opinion, see Cutler et al 2008; on media, see Brown, Horsburgh and Klem 2005). This failure was particularly striking as the decade earlier had witnessed a very successful public education model implemented in New Zealand during their voting system referenda (Nagel 1994).

The Liberals put off comment on how the government planned to respond to the STV results until the fall of 2005, refusing to commit to either accepting the reform or declaring it lost. In the meantime, public opinion on what course to take with the referendum results seemed evenly divided, with 47% claiming it had failed, 39% supporting the introduction STV anyway, and 14% unsure (Angus Reid, June 14, 2005). Then, in the fall Throne Speech, the Liberals appeared to give something to everyone. They rejected calls for simply introducing STV and they rejected re-opening the process to consider other voting system options. Instead, they announced that the province would vote again on the BC-CA proposal, but this time a provisional map of STV ridings would be prepared, and both pro and anti-STV forces would be given public money to mount more effective campaigns on the issue (British Columbia 2005). Initially the government promised to hold the second referendum in line with municipal elections in the fall of 2008 so STV, if chosen, could be used for the 2009 provincial election. But under protest from Elections BC, specifically that they would not be ready in time if STV were chosen, the date was changed to coincide with the fixed provincial election date in May 2009 (British Columbia 2006).

The 2009 campaign

British Columbia's 2005 referendum created a sense of inertia and inevitability around the various voting system reform initiatives that were being developed across the country. As the chairman of PEI Electoral Future Commission commented at the time, "I think the writing seems to be on the wall. The time is right for this things to go forward" (Howlett, *Globe and Mail*, May 19, 2005). Prince Edward Island did commit to vote on a mixed-member form of proportional representation (MMP) in the fall of 2005 and Ontario began structuring its own citizens' assembly model to get underway in 2006. For a time most media and political elites grumbled about the issue but seem resigned that it was coming, sooner or later. Meanwhile Quebec and New Brunswick also continued to develop plans for a public consultation on voting systems.

But the vote total was not the only influence to stretch across the country. Political and media elites also took note of the various strategies employed by British Columbia's governing Liberals and how the general pro-citizens' assembly sentiment made criticizing their proposal more difficult. As a result, both Prince Edward Island and Ontario mimicked British Columbia in adopting super-majority rules and failing to invest effectively in public education. And they added some new twists. Prince Edward Island ran a shambles of a campaign, changing many rules at the last minute and opening only a fraction of the island's traditional voting locations. As Peter McKenna noted shortly after the debacle, it "certainly looked as if the entire electoral

reform process – from start to finish – was more of an exercise in public relations and political symbolism than an honest and forthright effort at purposeful and fundamental electoral reform on PEI (McKenna 2006; 58-9)." In the end, voter turnout in Prince Edward Island was poor (roughly 33%) and the MMP option gained only 36% of the votes (Massicotte 2008; 132). In Ontario, media elites were not prepared to grant their citizens' assembly the sort of honeymoon that British Columbia's media had. Even before the citizen participants had been chosen, various high profile columnists began attacking their credibility in an obvious attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the exercise (Pilon 2009a; 13). But most media accomplished the same objective – minimizing the impact of the citizens' assembly – by simply failing to give it much coverage at all. Things did not improve once the campaign started either, with one poll half way through the election finding 88% of respondents claiming either very little knowledge about the proposed referendum choices (41%) or none at all (47%) (Howlett, *Globe and Mail*, September 24, 2007). Ontario's citizens' assembly also recommended an MMP form of proportional representation, but it too failed to gain more than 37% of the vote.

In both Prince Edward Island and Ontario, the public remained largely unaware of the referenda, let alone the details of the proposals on offer. In both cases the media and the various campaigns for and against the proposals failed utterly in raising the public profile of referendum or its substance. In Ontario, the media was particularly one-sided against change (Pilon 2009a), so much so that they were dubbed by one set of analysts as the unofficial 'No' campaign (Leduc et al 2008). Not surprisingly, media commentators and opponents of the reforms claimed that both defeats represented a decisive verdict from the public. But subsequent academic analysis seemed to suggest just the opposite. From surveys conducted during the Ontario referendum campaign researchers discovered that voters paradoxically wanted more proportionality in their election results but did not connect the referendum or the proposal with addressing that desire. In fact, most of those that voted against the MMP proposal did so out of ignorance, a not untypical response in referenda. By contrast, voters supporting the MMP proposal reported a much higher knowledge about the substance of the issue being voted on (Cutler and Fournier 2007). Meanwhile, both Quebec and New Brunswick reform processes were derailed by election results, in both cases involving majority Liberal administrations confident that they could ignore the issue without political cost (Massicotte 2008; 132-4). That left British Columbia's 2009 vote the last best hope for those seeking voting system reform.

Between 2005 and 2009 those supporting STV in British Columbia seemed to fade from public view. While many kept meeting and strategizing for the campaign ahead, they did not appear to be able to utilize the time to better educate the public about their issue or gain access to the media. Indeed, analysis of public knowledge about STV in 2009 suggested it was hardly better than in 2005 (Carty, Cutler and Fournier 2009). The government claimed that its plan to fund two campaigns where each would take up one side of the debate would lead to a better-informed public. In the fall of 2008 the government sought applications from prospective groups to act as the organizers for the two campaigns and, in the end, chose essentially the two main groups that performed the same function in 2005 (British Columbia 2009). Both groups would attempt to look the part of professional campaigners, complete with slick websites, polling, and regular press releases. But as in 2005, they struggled to gain media coverage or the public's attention. Just less than a month from voting day, both groups reported polling that put

the percentage of respondents who knew nothing about the referendum at around 60% (BC-STV, April 15, 2009; No-STV, April 23, 2009). Meanwhile, the government drew from the referendum experience elsewhere in the country, changing the ballot structure for the 2009 referendum from a Yes/No for STV to a choice between 'the existing system' and STV (mimicking the approach utilized in Ontario). They also altered the question wording, downgrading the BC-CA's endorsement of STV from "recommended" to merely "proposed".

To the extent a referendum finally got off the ground in April 2009, the NO-STV campaign appeared to be more successful in setting the media frame for discussions. Just being allowed to dub themselves "No STV" was their first victory. As the referendum choice was supposed to be between 'the existing system' FPTP and STV, it was reasonable to expect that at least one group should be focusing attention on the 'existing system'. But NO-STV effectively made the campaign into a referendum on STV, forcing their opponents to spend most of their time arguing about the often rather wild and unsubstantiated claims the critics was making (Pilon 2009b; 2009c). This interaction reflected the very different ways in which the two campaigns spent their windfall $500,000 from the government. YES-STV (now officially "BC-STV" but often still referred to as the Yes side) fashioned themselves as a campaign that reflected real grassroots support and tried to do the things that party-centred campaigns do: get lawn sights out, enlist volunteers, and attend community events, as well purchase polling services and television advertising (Grice 2009). By contrast, NO-STV was a small group of fairly professional and experienced political operatives who made no pretence of cultivating a grassroots. By their own admission, they treated the task as a public relations exercise, pouring most of their money into polling and focus groups early on in the campaign and heavy rotation media buys on television and radio for the last three weeks (Teileman, *Georgia Straight*, May 19, 2009). Later, a number of YES-STV campaign participants would complain that their grassroots democratic leadership style meant they had difficulty focusing their campaign and countering the tight messaging of the NO forces (Grice 2009).

It appears that the YES-STV campaign was torn between those that believed that they needed only to 'say yes louder' and find another 3% of the popular vote, and those that recognized that this referendum would be a different campaign than 2005. In the end, it was clear that the latter group had a better handle on what would occur as the political context in 2009 was strikingly different than the previous referendum for a number of reasons. In 2005, many NDP and Liberal voters were wary of recent election results and were unsure whether sticking with SMP was a good idea. At the same time, many political elites dismissed STV and the referendum as academic 'policy wonk' stuff that they thought would likely be ignored by the public. Both the election and referendum result of 2005 shattered these assumptions. For Liberals and the NDP, the 2005 election results signaled everything was back to normal for the province's left/right competition. For political elites, the surprisingly strong showing for STV in 2005 meant that it was a threat to be taken seriously and more vigorously opposed. For their part, the media spent less time harkening back to the work of the Citizens' Assembly and gave more space to the key issues highlighted by the NO-STV campaign, particularly concerns about the complexity of the count and the size of the new multi-member ridings (e.g. Baldrey, *Abbottsford Times*, May 1, 2009; Koopmans, *Kamloops Daily News*, May 1, 2009).

The 'normalization' of the party system coming out of the 2005 election also explains why neither of British Columbia's two major parties was prepared to engage publicly on the voting system issue. Again, as in 2005, both Liberal and NDP leaderships declared that the voters should decide without party interference, though this time the NDP leader did suggest that individual NDP candidates could say what they liked on STV (Palmer, *Vancouver Sun*, April 13, 2009). However, behind the scenes, 'friends' of both parties, be they organized labour or business representatives, continued to promote anti-STV views, either through doorstep campaigning, phone bank voter contact, or by sponsoring op/eds in local media (e.g. Edwards, *Trail Times*, April 24, 2009; Neufeld, *Vancouver Sun*, May 11, 2009). Some NDPers, mostly federal MPs and candidates for the party, did eventually endorse STV, as well as a few provincial unions, but most NDP candidates simply tried to dodge the issue (MacLeod, *The Tyee*, May 6, 2009; Gyamati, *Delta Optimist*, May 9, 2009; Hanson, *Vancouver Sun*, April 30, 2009). Only the provincial Greens took a strong public stance in favour of STV, with new leader Jane Sterk reversing her predecessor's disastrous position (Burrows, *Georgia Straight*, October 25, 2007).

Initially things appeared to be going well for the YES-STV campaign. On April 15 they issued a press release claiming that their polling showed 65% of respondents now favoured STV, with only 35% for SMP (BC-STV, April 15, 2009). But a week later NO-STV had a poll of their own showing only 43% in favour of STV compared to 41% for SMP (No-STV, April 23, 2009). The devil was in the fine print – nearly 60% of respondents in both polls claimed no knowledge of a referendum at all, let alone what it was about. Throughout the campaign Angus Reid and Ipsos Reid prepared dueling polling numbers, with the former drawing from new online techniques and the latter using standard telephone contact. On May 6 Angus Reid published polling numbers that appeared to put the STV campaign in a close but competitive position to win, with 53% of respondents supporting it (Angus Reid, May 6, 2009). But three days later Ipsos Reid had STV support down to 33% with SMP at 52% (Ipsos Reid May 9, 2009). On election-day itself, STV rallied to 39%, but well short of its goal. In fact, instead of STV supporters 'saying yes louder' in this second referendum, it was actually the SMP forces that met both super-majority thresholds (Elections BC 2009).

This time, there was little media debate over the results. NO-STV declared that the people had spoken and loudly rejected STV. The *Globe and Mail* telegraphed their editorial view fairly clearly under the headline 'The Waning of Electoral Reform,' suggesting that the recent referendum signaled a "clear defeat" for STV and the voting system reform cause generally across the country (Editorial, *Globe and Mail*, May 14, 2009). YES-STV and other voting system reform supporters tried to put a brave face on the results (Hall, *Vancouver Sun*, May 13, 2009; Hallsor, *Georgia Straight*, May 14, 2009) but most admitted that the critics were probably right – STV and voting reform were probably dead for a generation at least (Payne, *Nelson Daily News*, May 20, 2009). "I think it's like the parrot in Monty Python. I think it's merely resting," said David Marley, a Fair Voting BC co-founder, "but I think it's going to rest for quite a while" (Seyd, *North Shore News*, May 17, 2009) A few days after the election, Gordon Campbell confirmed these views when he declared that voting reform was no longer a priority for his government (Mickleburgh, *Globe and Mail*, May 14, 2009).

As with the previous referendum, those opposed to change credited their arguments and efforts with influencing the results. After the results were in, NO-STV spokesmen Bill Teileman, David Schreck, and Bob Plecas claimed that their campaign had helped inform the public about STV and led directly to the reversal of public support. For them, the new results were easy to interpret: the more the public found out about STV, they claimed, the less they liked it (Teileman, *Georgia Straight*. May 19, 2009; Plecas, *Victoria Times-Colonist*, May 21, 2009; with some academic support from Stephenson, *Prince Rupert Daily News*, October 23, 2009). But academic survey work carried out during the British Columbia referendum campaign directly challenged most of the No-STV claims, specifically finding little public concern about coalitions, instability, or the complexity of the STV counting system, many of the key themes highlighted by those opposed. Instead, the cumulative results of all the survey work demonstrated many continuities across the 2005, 2007 and 2009 referenda in British Columbia and Ontario. All uncovered majority support for broad proportionality in elections, despite the defeat of the particular proportional option in each case. This they attributed to their other key consistent finding: deep public ignorance about the existence of the referenda and the referendum choices, combined with a shifting sense of partisan self interest between the 2005 and 2009 votes in the British Columbia case. They found that many people knew very little about the referendum and so voted for the status quo, a typical referendum response by voters with low information. The weakening positive influence of the Citizens' Assembly was also an important factor. Finally, the confidence of Liberal voters witnessed their support for STV plummet between the elections (Carty, Cutler and Fournier 2009). BC-STV was, it seems, ultimately rejected because voters either knew too little or thought they had too little to gain.

Conclusion

With the clear failure of the STV option in 2009, the results of British Columbia's two referenda challenging its conventional SMP voting system have been explained as the product of the public's satisfaction with the status quo, or their preference for simplicity in all things electoral, or as a direct result of the efforts of the NO-STV campaigns. But none of these are very compelling explanations. After all, the STV option nearly passed in 2005, with 58% of the popular vote and a majority in 77 or 79 ridings. Attempts to explain the first result by recourse to the province's alleged penchant for populism only begs the question, where did the populism go in 2009 when STV support sank to 39%? Academic survey work suggests that public attitudes around reform remained remarkably constant between the two votes: in both cases an overwhelming majority of British Columbians supported the general notion of proportionality in election results and had very little knowledge of electoral rules, simple or otherwise. And as neither referenda managed to gain any sustained media attention or report much public knowledge about the issue, it is hard to credit campaign effects with these results. Thus it is hard to agree with NO-STV that voters in 2009 grew more concerned about the practical workings of STV. Instead, it would appear that both the relative success of reform in 2005 and its failure in 2009 were produced amid widespread public ignorance of both the referendum and the substance of the issue at stake.

Without discounting the important influence of the public's positive perceptions of the BC-CA in 2005, two other factors – elite manipulation of the process and partisan insecurity about their competitive position electorally – were arguably more important in explaining the change between 2005 and 2009. First, in both cases, elite decisions were crucial influences on the results. Overall, elite control of the process allowed them to create barriers to reform, like the insistence on super-majority rules. Second, partisan insecurity in 2005 contributed to a high level of cross-party support for change as a large number of both NDP and Liberal party supporters remained unsure about where the party system was heading. After the results of the 2005 election confirmed the restoration of the province's traditional left-right dualism, this insecurity declined, particularly for the Liberals. In 2009, Liberal voter support for STV plummeted.

These conclusions are reinforced when British Columbia's experience is cast against the other two provincial referenda on the voting system. As the first and fourth of these provincial events, we can see both how British Columbia established the key elements of elite manipulation of the process for other jurisdictions in the 2005 referendum (e.g. super-majority rules) and picked up some innovations from other locales in time for the 2009 vote (e.g. reworking the structure and wording of the ballot question). At the same time, British Columbia's seeming populist outburst in 2005 shrank to levels commensurate with other jurisdictions by 2009, raising questions about just how exceptional or populist the province really is. Indeed, the results in Prince Edward Island (2005), Ontario (2007), and British Columbia (2009) range between 36% and 39%, a hardly significant difference. Instead of populism, what appears to distinguish BC in 2005 from the other jurisdictions is the instability in the party system. Partisans in 2005 appeared to opt for STV as a kind of insurance against further unforeseeable changes in their party's competitive position. But by 2009 things had changed. The partisans were less insecure and the populists proved no match for their more serious and focused adversaries. In the end, given their control over crucial aspects of the decision-making affecting the process (and with partisan insecurity removed from the equation), it appears that traditional elites were better placed to channel that ignorance than the populist forces driving the reform.

Table 1: Referendum Results by Province/Date

Locale	Date	Options	Voter Turnout	Referendum Results
BC	May 2005	STV, yes or no	61%	Yes: 58% No: 42%
PEI	Nov 2005	MMP, yes or no	33%	Yes: 36% No: 64%
Ontario	Oct 2007	SMP or MMP	52%	SMP: 63% MMP: 37%
BC	May 2009	SMP or STV	55%	SMP: 61% STV: 39%

Sources: Elections BC, Elections Ontario, and Elections PEI.

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