When Citizens Decide:

Lessons from Citizen Assemblies on Electoral Reform

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I

Power to the People?

And yet the reasons are utterly ludicrous which [the many] give in confirmation of their own notions about the honourable and good. Did you ever hear any of them which were not?

Plato, The Republic: Book VI (≈380 BCE)

(…) if the people are not utterly degraded, although individually they may be worse judges than those who have special knowledge – as a body they are as good or better.

Aristotle, Politics: Book III (≈330 BCE)

And those people should not be listened to who keep saying the voice of the people is the voice of God, since the riotousness of the crowd is always very close to madness.

Alcuin of York, letter to Charlemagne (798)

But as regards prudence and stability, I say that the people are more prudent and stable, and have better judgment than a prince; and it is not without good reason that it is said, ‘The voice of the people is the voice of God’.

Niccolò Machiavelli, Discourses on Titus Livius (1531)

The voice of the people has been said to be the voice of God; and however generally this maxim has been quoted and believed, it is not true in fact. The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right.

Alexander Hamilton, speech at the Constitutional Convention (1787)

(…) governments are more or less republican as they have more or less of the element of popular election and control in their composition; and believing as I do that the mass of the citizens is the safest depository of their own rights, (…) I am a friend to that composition of government which has in it the most of this ingredient.

Thomas Jefferson, letter to John Taylor (1816)
2

When Citizens Decide

The biggest argument against democracy is a five-minute discussion with the average voter.

Sir Winston Churchill

The ultimate rulers of our democracy are not a president and senators and congressmen and government officials, but the voters of this country.

Franklin D. Roosevelt

If the right people don’t have power do you know what happens? The wrong people get it; politicians, councillors, ordinary voters. / But aren’t they supposed to in a democracy? / This is a British democracy. / How do you mean? / British democracy recognizes that you need a system to protect the important things of life and keep them out of the hands of the barbarians.

Sir Humphrey Appleby / Bernard Woolley, Yes Prime Minister (1988)

Listen, strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government. Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony.

Dennis (to King Arthur), Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1975)

Throughout human history, political thinkers, observers, and practitioners have debated the competence of citizens. The claims cited above illustrate the different perspectives of both ancient and modern philosophers (or philosophizers) on the capacity of ordinary people to make enlightened political decisions. In a letter written after his presidency, Thomas Jefferson observed that men naturally divide into two camps. On the one hand, there are those ‘who fear and distrust the people, and wish to draw all powers from them into the hands of the higher classes’ (Jefferson 1824). That view is exemplified by the citations that line up on the right side above. It sees the public as emotional, impulsive, thoughtless, selfish, deceitful, fickle, easily fooled, mistake-prone, cruel, violent, and fundamentally dangerous. Plato advanced this perspective in The Republic, comparing the affairs of state in democratic Athens with the state of affairs on a nautical vessel:

Imagine then a fleet or a ship in which there is a captain who is taller and stronger than any of the crew, but he is a little deaf and has a similar infirmity in sight, and his knowledge of navigation is not much better. The sailors are quarrelling with one another about the steering – everyone is of opinion that he has a right to steer, though he has never learned the art of navigation and cannot tell who taught him or when he learned, and will further assert that it cannot be taught, and they are ready to cut in pieces anyone who says the contrary. They throng about the captain, begging and praying him to commit the helm to them; and if at any time they do not prevail, but others are
preferred to them, they kill the others or throw them overboard, and having
first chained up the noble captain’s senses with drink or some narcotic drug,
they mutiny and take possession of the ship and make free with the stores;
thus, eating and drinking, they proceed on their voyage in such manner as
might be expected of them.

On the other hand, there are those ‘who identify themselves with the people, have
confidence in them, cherish and consider them as the most honest and safe’
(Jefferson 1824). This more positive, or optimistic, view is reflected by the citations
on the left side of the dialogue above. It considers people to possess the virtues of
decency, honesty, justice, prudence, reliability, resourcefulness, trustworthiness,
and wisdom. In his treatise on Politics, Aristotle disagreed with his mentor because
he focused on the qualities of citizens as a collective rather than as individuals:

The rule of many is upon the whole the best solution of these difficulties. The
people, taken collectively, though composed of ordinary individuals, have more
virtue and wisdom than any single man among them. As the feast to which many
contribute is better than the feast given by one, as the judgement of the many at
the theatre is truer than the judgement of one, as a good man and a fair work of art
have many elements of beauty or goodness combined in them; so the assembly of
the people has more good sense and wisdom than any individual member of it.

The relative power of these two strands of thought has varied over time, but they
have continually coexisted. The pessimistic view dominated until the eighteenth
and nineteenth centuries. Prior to this era, it was simply inconceivable to grant the
population the opportunity to make important social decisions. Consequently,
more than two millennia would pass after the Athenian democratic experience
before popular sovereignty would re-emerge as a viable political alternative. And
when democracy reappeared, it did so in a more limited fashion. For instance, a
continuing ambivalence about the public’s capacity led America’s founding
fathers to restrain the influence of the populace. Thus, they conferred the right to
vote only on male landowners. Also, by dividing power among three distinct
levels (executive, legislative, and judiciary), they sought to minimize the possibil-
ity that authorities would be swayed by the madness of the masses. And to this
day, American citizens do not vote directly for the country’s head of state and
government – they instead vote for electors who then formally select the president.

These opposing visions about the competence of citizens still shape debates
today, although the nature and tone of the exchanges have evolved. The
more optimistic tradition carries on, now using a language different from that of
Aristotle or Machiavelli. Contemporary scholars with this view generally recognize
that most citizens are not politically sophisticated: they are sparsely interested,
attentive, and informed about politics. These facts have, after all, been established
incontrovertibly (Converse 1964; Luskin 1987; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996;
Fourier 2002). Nevertheless, public wisdom is possible because of two processes.
At the individual level, citizens can take advantage of decisional heuristics –
affective and cognitive shortcuts and cues which allow them to simplify political choices and reach correct decisions (Lodge et al. 1989, 1995; Popkin 1991; Sniderman et al. 1991; Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). At the collective level, aggregating individual opinions together tends to eliminate random off-setting errors and fluctuations and to capture the public’s true sensible preferences (Miller 1986; Page and Shapiro 1992; Erikson et al. 2002). Book titles by authors that perpetuate this strand of thought are quite telling: *The Reasoning Voter*, *Reasoning and Choice*, *The Rational Public*, and *Motivated Political Reasoning*. Indeed, Samuel Popkin puts the position bluntly by concluding: ‘voters actually do reason about parties, candidates, and issues. They have premises, and they use those premises to make inferences from their observations of the world around them. They think about who and what political parties stand for; they think about what government can and should do. And the performance of government, parties, and candidates affects their assessments and preferences’ (1991: 7).

Arguments from the more pessimistic side no longer call into question the legitimacy of popular sovereignty. Rather, they emphasize the biases and errors in public political decisions. Evidence shows that ‘various and sometimes severe distortions can occur in people’s political judgements. They hold inaccurate and stereotyped factual beliefs, hold their beliefs overconfidently, resist correct information, prefer easy arguments, interpret elite statements according to racial or other biases, and rely heavily on scanty information about a candidate’s policy positions’ (Kuklinski and Quirk 2000: 179). The result is that individuals and collectives make political choices which differ from the ones they would have made had they been informed (Bartels 1996; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Althaus 1998, 2003; Luskin et al. 2002; Fournier 2006; Blais et al. 2009). And since elections and public opinion have an impact on the conduct of public policy (Blais et al. 1993, 1996; Erikson et al. 2002; Soroka and Wlezien 2010), there are real repercussions of this poor decision-making for democratic governance.

1.1 HOW CAN WE SHED SOME LIGHT ON THE POLITICAL COMPETENCE OF CITIZENS?

Debates about the competence of citizens have persisted over several thousand years, and they are unlikely to disappear overnight. In part, this resilience reflects the fundamentally ontological nature of the debate; where one sits and the

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1 These titles are half a world away from Gustave Le Bon’s assertion, at the dawn of the twentieth century, that ‘the arguments [crowds] employ and those which are capable of influencing them are, from a logical point of view, of such an inferior kind that it is only by way of analogy that they can be described as reasoning’ (1896).
premises brought to the table largely determine how one reads the argument (Sniderman et al. 1991: 17).

This book proposes a different approach, one that is decidedly empirical. It looks as closely as possible at what ordinary citizens actually do when they are given the opportunity to make important political decisions. We recognize that situations where people play an influential role are rather unusual. However, such occasions are extremely revealing, providing us with important evidence about the inherent potential and limitations of citizens.

Modern democracies use representative institutions, so that the population does not exercise political power directly. Rather, the people designate representatives who govern in their name. Voters bestow their confidence, in a temporary and reversible fashion, on a group of delegates who are chosen via open competitive elections. It is those elected officials who determine which policies are established, modified, or abolished. Thus, citizens play a relatively small role in policymaking. They are sometimes consulted through various mechanisms, but their contribution to the legislative process remains limited. Even during a referendum, people can only accept or decline a proposal, they rarely control what is proposed. Furthermore, a person’s single vote will not change the outcome of an election or a referendum.

Given that the stakes are so low, it makes sense for citizens to invest little time and effort in political matters (Downs 1957). However, the implicit assumption behind this logic seems to be that given a real chance to make a difference, people could and would live up to the challenge. But is that assumption valid? Are citizens more engaged and competent when they are offered a chance to play a decisive role in political decision-making? This question is quite possibly the central query in representative democratic thought.

Answering this question has not been possible because, in the absence of cases where citizens could contribute decisively to the development of public policy, we have lacked appropriate evidence. The situation has now changed. Three unprecedented democratic experiments have recently taken place. Instead of just voting, sanctioning, chastising, or being consulted, individual citizens were given the chance to spend a year developing a new political institution. Between 2004 and 2007, citizen assemblies on electoral reform were established in British Columbia, the Netherlands, and Ontario. In all three instances, governments entrusted a group of randomly selected citizens with the independent responsibility to design their political community’s electoral system. In the two Canadian cases, the recommendations were the subject of a binding public referendum; in the Dutch case, the recommendation was delivered to the government.

Citizen assemblies are interesting stories in and of themselves. More significantly, they provide valuable insight into key questions about citizen competence and democratic politics. Under such extraordinary circumstances, the stakes are much higher than usual. Assembly participants had the opportunity to decisively influence politics. Do citizens behave differently in such a context? Do people get politically motivated and active? Does only a very interested group get involved?
Are the participants transformed in the process? Can citizens take reasonable policy decisions? Are they influenced by inappropriate factors? Can the larger public and political elites accept reforms designed by ordinary people? These are the kinds of questions that we address in this book.

1.2 HOW DID THE CITIZEN ASSEMBLIES WORK?

Only three citizen assemblies have been established up to this point. All three dealt with electoral system reform. All three involved similar processes. But each came to a different conclusion about what electoral system should be implemented in their respective jurisdictions. This section provides an overview of these citizen assemblies.

**Table 1.1 Outline of the Three Citizen Assemblies on Electoral Reform**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>British Columbia</th>
<th>The Netherlands</th>
<th>Ontario</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of participants</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>143 (140)</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender split</td>
<td>50/50</td>
<td>50/50</td>
<td>50/50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection phase</td>
<td>Pool drawn randomly from voters’ list; interested people signify their interest; participants picked randomly among interested</td>
<td>Home study + 6 weekends (Jan.–Mar.’04)</td>
<td>Home study + 6 weekends (Mar.–June’06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning phase</td>
<td>Home study + 6 weekends (Jan.–Mar.’04)</td>
<td>Home study + 6 weekends (Mar.–June’06)</td>
<td>Home study + 6 weekends (Sep.–Nov.’06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultation phase</td>
<td>50 public hearings, 1600 submissions (May–June’04)</td>
<td>18 public hearings, 1400 submissions (May–June’06)</td>
<td>41 public hearings, 1000 submissions (Oct.’06–Jan.’07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberation phase</td>
<td>6 weekends (Sep.–Nov.’04)</td>
<td>4 weekends (Sep.–Nov.’06)</td>
<td>6 weekends (Feb.–Apr.’07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of meeting days</td>
<td>&gt;26*</td>
<td>&gt;20*</td>
<td>&gt;24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existing system</td>
<td>SMP</td>
<td>List-PR</td>
<td>SMP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reform proposal</td>
<td>STV</td>
<td>List-PR (change of details)</td>
<td>MMP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destination of</td>
<td>Binding public referendum (May’05/May’09)</td>
<td>Report to government (Nov.’06)</td>
<td>Binding public referendum (Oct.’07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recommendation</td>
<td>Narrowly failed/ failed decisively</td>
<td>Proposal rejected</td>
<td>Failed decisively</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The total number of work days depended on the number of public meetings attended by members (they generally attended several). Note that this total does not include days spent at home on reading, study, and research.
assemblies. Basic information about the process and the outcomes is presented in summary fashion in Table 1.1.

1.2.1 The British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform

The first citizen assembly was initiated with the unanimous support of the British Columbia legislature. Potential members were chosen at random from the voters’ list and contacted by mail. They were asked to indicate their willingness to take part in the process and to attend an information meeting. Thus, self-selection was clearly part of the selection process. Among interested participants, one man and one woman were picked for each electoral district, literally drawn from a hat: seventy-nine men, seventy-nine women. These individuals came from various backgrounds, ethnic communities, and occupations. They were given a clear and precise mandate: the assembly could recommend maintaining the existing electoral system (single member plurality) or propose the adoption of any other system (even one not in use). If the assembly came to the conclusion that a new system should be put in place, it was to formulate a specific reform proposal which would be submitted to the population for approval in a referendum. If the public agreed with the proposal, the new electoral system would take effect by the following election. Thus, the assembly had real power; its recommendation would be put directly to the electorate, and it could not be shelved even if the government was not happy with it.

To accomplish these responsibilities, a three-phase year-long process was designed and implemented. The first phase was learning. Typical of ordinary citizens, assembly members knew very little about electoral systems at the start of the whole process. They were assigned reading material and received a six-weekend crash course on electoral systems in Vancouver during the first months of 2004. Lectures and discussions occurred in plenary and small-group sessions. The second phase was consultation. Fifty public hearings, each attended by four to sixteen different assembly members, were held across the province. Anyone could come and argue for or against any electoral system. In addition, a website was set up to encourage public proposals for reform and 1600 proposals were received from all over the world. At the end of those public consultations, members held another weekend session to share, digest, and discuss what they had heard. Finally, there was a deliberation phase. It consisted of six weekends in the fall. Members first identified their core values, the key features they believed an electoral system should

2 A detailed description can be found in the technical report of the British Columbia assembly (BCCAER 2004). For accounts by members, see Herath (2007), MacDonald (2005), and Walker (2005). Warren and Pearse (2008) provide an academic analysis of the assembly.

3 One man and woman from British Columbia’s aboriginal communities were subsequently selected when it was discovered that none had emerged through the regular district-level process.
contain. This set of values narrowed the list of potential systems to consider. They were left with single member plurality (SMP; the current ‘first past the post’ system), and two alternatives: single transferable vote (STV), and mixed member proportional (MMP). Members then spent two weekends constructing detailed models of the alternate systems they thought might be appropriate for the province. Finally, they debated the merits of their alternatives in comparison with the existing process and decided that the STV was the best electoral system for the province.

The referendum on the assembly’s proposal took place on 17 May 2005 at the time of the provincial general election. The legislature had previously set two thresholds for success: 60 per cent support province-wide, with a majority in 60 per cent of constituencies. Following a campaign where party competition for office overshadowed discussion of the reform proposal, the referendum did not clear one of the two bars. STV garnered a majority in 97 per cent of constituencies (all but two districts), but was supported by only 58 per cent of the voters province-wide. Sensing the assembly’s recommendation might not have benefited from a complete debate, the government decided to hold another referendum on the same proposal on 12 May 2009, again coinciding with a provincial election. This time, STV failed decidedly: receiving 39 per cent across the province, with a majority in no more than 9 per cent of the districts.

1.2.2 The Netherlands’ Electoral System Civic Forum (Burgerforum)^

The Dutch Burgerforum was the second citizen assembly. The Burgerforum was comprised of 143 individuals, drawn from a group of 1732 who self-selected themselves from a random pool of 50,400 invited eligible voters. While clearly inspired by the British Columbia innovation, the Dutch assembly compressed their schedule of activities into nine months from March to November 2006. The learning phase on electoral systems was spread over six weekends (in The Hague and Zeist), and it overlapped a public consultation phase which involved eighteen local meetings in May and June. Four weekends in the fall were then dedicated to the decision-making phase.

This was the only citizen assembly for which an SMP electoral system did not represent the status quo. Elections in the Netherlands are conducted under (semi-)open-list proportional representation (list-PR). Rather early in their deliberation phase, the Dutch assembly opted to retain the same type of system, so most

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^STV is a form of preferential PR where voters are able to rank order as many candidates as they choose in electoral districts that return more than one candidate to the legislature. MMP is a mixed system that typically gives electors two votes, one for a local candidate in an SMP component, and one for a list of party candidates that is then used to compensate for the lack of proportionality in the SMP part of the system. For an accessible description of these options, see Appendix 1 and Farrell (2001).

^A detailed description can be found in the technical report of the Burgerforum (2006 proces verslag; also available in English on the DVD that accompanied the final proposal).
discussions turned on potential (if substantial) modifications to it. In the system ultimately recommended, voters would still cast one vote, either for a specific candidate from one of the party lists (as currently) or for a party list. Under the proposal, citizen preferences would exert increased influence over which list candidates get elected, since votes for specific individuals would garner more weight than they currently do. The assembly also proposed a revision to the method by which residual seats are allocated.

The Burgerforum’s set of recommendations was not presented to the population in a binding referendum. Rather, it was submitted to a new government, elected while the assembly was working. On 18 April 2008, the State Secretary of the Interior and Kingdom Relations sent a letter to parliament, stating that the government would not implement the proposal of the citizen assembly.

1.2.3 The Ontario Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform

The Ontarian experience mirrored the pattern set in British Columbia. The selection process combined randomness with self-selection. The learning phase hinged around six residential weekends in Toronto during the fall of 2006. The consultation phase relied on public meetings and written submissions. And the deliberation phase, in the spring of 2007, saw the assembly identify its objectives, construct two alternative electoral systems, and then come to a decision. The Ontario gender-balanced assembly was the smallest of the three: it contained 103 citizens, one for each of the provincial legislature’s electoral districts.

After examining all options, this assembly’s shortlist contained the same electoral systems as British Columbia’s: SMP (the status quo), STV, and MMP (the two alternatives). Ontario citizen assembly members, however, opted to recommend MMP. The particular version of MMP they designed would give voters two votes, one for a local district candidate (this SMP component filling 70 per cent of the seats) and one for a political party (this component to allocate the remaining 30 per cent of the seats).

This reform proposal was also the subject of a binding referendum in October 2007, held at the time of a provincial general election. Again, the legislature had set a double threshold: 60 per cent of voter support across the entire province, and a majority in at least 60 per cent of districts. Neither was reached. Only 37 per cent voted in favour of the recommendation, and in only 5 ridings out of 107 did it garner a majority.

6 For an extensive account, see the technical report (OCAER 2007a).
1.3 WHAT MADE THE CITIZEN ASSEMBLIES UNIQUE?

Citizen assemblies are intended to be instances of direct, participatory, and deliberative democracy. First of all, their design echoes one of the important institutions of Athenian direct democracy from the sixth century BCE. The fundamental political body in Athens was the *ecclesia* (assembly). All citizens in good standing—that is, males with military training—could attend to vote on important decisions (e.g. war, legislation, criminal trial). Meetings of the assembly were held regularly though not frequently: once a month initially, and up to once a week during the fourth century BCE. The day-to-day operations of government, however, were managed by a less well-known institution: the *boule* (council). This council was composed of 400 individuals (later 500) who met on a daily basis. Council members were drawn by lot among citizens who had declared themselves eligible by placing their name written on a piece of pottery in a large designated jar. Mandates lasted for one year and a person could serve twice during his lifetime. In compensation for absence from their regular occupation, members of the *boule* were exempt from military service for the year, and were paid for attendance. The council supervised the republic’s finances, bureaucracy, military resources, foreign relations, construction, commerce, and social welfare. Most importantly, it prepared and wrote legislation that would then be sanctioned by the assembly.

In many ways, modern citizen assemblies resemble the Athenian council much more than their namesake. A citizen assembly and a *boule* both work for approximately one year, both are filled through a combination of self-selection and randomness, both have members remunerated for their service to the community, and both need to have their major recommendations approved (sometimes by the wider electorate). Although modern citizen assemblies have fewer participants, meet less frequently, and have narrower responsibilities than their ancient counterparts, the similarities are nevertheless striking.

Recent decades have witnessed the appearance of a myriad of projects associated with participatory democracy. These mechanisms seek to augment public engagement and participation in decisions. One study inventoried over 100 different types (Rowe and Frewer 2005), including citizen juries/planungszelle, consensus conferences, deliberative polls, and participatory budgeting. Citizen assemblies stand out as constituting the most extensive modern form of collective decision-making by common folk. It is the only method of citizen policymaking that combines all the following characteristics: a relatively large group of ordinary people, lengthy periods of learning and deliberation, and a collective decision with important political consequences for an entire political system. Table 1.2 compares the main features of the three citizen assemblies with the other principal participatory institutions.7

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Developed by (first instance)</th>
<th>Citizen juries/planungszelle</th>
<th>Consensus conferences</th>
<th>Deliberative polls</th>
<th>Participatory budgeting</th>
<th>Citizen assemblies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of citizens</td>
<td>12–26</td>
<td>10–18</td>
<td>100–360</td>
<td>30–50</td>
<td>103–160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of meetings</td>
<td>4–5 days</td>
<td>7–8 days</td>
<td>2–3 days</td>
<td>Varies, often quite intensive</td>
<td>20–30 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Information + deliberation</td>
<td>Information + deliberation</td>
<td>Information + deliberation</td>
<td>Consultation + deliberation</td>
<td>Information + deliberation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Result</td>
<td>Collective position report</td>
<td>Collective position report</td>
<td>Survey opinions</td>
<td>Budgetary allocations</td>
<td>Detailed policy recommendation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destination of proposal</td>
<td>Sponsor and mass media</td>
<td>Parliament and mass media</td>
<td>Sponsor and mass media</td>
<td>Local public officials</td>
<td>Government and public referendum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
First, citizen assemblies involve more participants than most other forms of participatory democracy. For instance, citizen juries and consensus conferences typically consist of a dozen or two individuals. Around thirty to fifty elected delegates are actively involved throughout the participatory budget process. Only deliberative polls have clearly exceeded the number of participants found in the assemblies.

Second, the length of learning and deliberation activities in citizen assemblies is unparalleled with proceedings spanning some nine to twelve months. Participants met for the equivalent of at least ten deliberative polls. As a result, citizen assembly members could rely on incomparable amounts of time for learning, discussion, and debate with many weeks available for each of these distinct tasks. Only participatory budgeting can rival citizen assemblies in terms of the number of meetings, but they rarely involve extensive learning activities.

Third, the three citizen assemblies had to collectively build a detailed institutional design from scratch. Rather than expressing individual preferences in a survey or voting on a set of predefined options as in deliberative polls, each assembly’s membership had to reach a collective agreement on the concrete specifics of an electoral system.

Fourth, a citizen assembly proposal had important weight, both in terms of mandate and procedure. On the one hand, these three groups were entrusted with the responsibility to devise a cornerstone of representative democracies. Electoral systems have a crucial impact on the distribution of power by translating individual preferences expressed as votes into an allocation of seats in parliament that in turn determines which party or parties form the government. On the other hand, the assemblies’ recommendations would be taken seriously. One was to go directly to the government, and the other two were to be the subject of a binding public referendum. Both the substance of the decision each assembly had to make and what would become of that decision were politically significant. Only cases of binding participatory budget decisions match the political relevance of citizen assemblies, though the two deal with quite different policies and polities: concrete budget allocations in local communities versus the institutional allocation of power during national and provincial elections.

Finally, unlike deliberative polls, assembly participants do not constitute a strictly random sample of the population. They are drawn randomly from among those who demonstrated interest within a random sample of voters. Citizen assembly architects presumed that it is very difficult to have people commit to such extended proceedings without some element of self-selection. Later, we will examine whether this matters or not.

Citizen assemblies are also exercises of deliberative democracy. Work in that area was developed by political theorists (e.g. Manin 1987; Cohen 1989, 1996;
Power to the People?

Habermas 1989, 1996; Dryzek 1990, 2000; Fishkin 1991, 1995; Gutmann and Thompson 1996, 2004; Elster 1998). Various real-world applications of the principles have included: conversations about public affairs among neighbours or co-workers (Mutz 2002, 2006; Cramer-Walsh 2003), discussions among naturally occurring groups such as town hall meetings (Mansbridge 1980) or school parent organizations (Rosenberg 2007), and experimental studies of exchanges and reflection in small groups of university students (Druckman and Nelson 2003; Druckman 2004; Mendelberg and Karpowitz 2007). Many of the contrasts we have noted between citizen assemblies and other participatory mechanisms apply equally to these examples of deliberative democracy. The deliberation practised by the citizen assemblies was of a much more considerable and decisive nature.

The three cases might be called ‘deliberation-on-steroids’. They present the most favourable environment for deliberative effects. So our analyses should capture the maximum impacts of such processes. Moreover, citizen assemblies constitute a litmus test for the consequences of deliberation. If potential effects cannot be uncovered in these three extensive applications, then it would be difficult to imagine a context where they would manifest themselves.

1.4 WHAT QUESTIONS DO THE CITIZEN ASSEMBLY EXPERIENCES HELP US ANSWER?

This book deals with three unique real-life instances of ordinary people exercising decisive political power. These extraordinary experiments are fascinating in their own right. They can also help us to address some core questions in the study of democratic politics.

1.4.1 Why do governments delegate power to citizens?

Citizen assemblies, especially on the question of electoral reform, are exceptional occurrences. It is one thing for political parties and governments to grant citizens a say in institutional design, but it is quite another for them to give up control over the rules of the game by which they compete for their own livelihood. It may make sense for public officials to try to pass the buck when facing difficult, divisive, or unpopular choices. Letting people pick the electoral system does not. Doing so defies the dominant view that political parties seek to shape the electoral rules in order to maximize their seats and power (Benoit 2004; Colomer 2005; Pilet 2007; Blais and Shugart 2008). From that perspective, political parties should only support the establishment of an assembly if they anticipate gaining something from its recommendations. We are thus driven to consider the possibility that
politicians are not solely motivated by seat maximization but also by ideological conceptions or ethical principles (Van der Kolk 2007; Bowler et al. 2008). Chapter 2 analyses both the reasons behind the existence of these citizen assemblies and their functioning. Why did three governments decide to institute a citizen assembly? How did the assemblies work? Why were they organized in such a way? Were they set up to fail?

1.4.2 How do the participants react to the process?

Chapter 2 also examines the overall reactions of the participants to the entire process. Did they engage in the proceedings? Did they learn about the issues at hand? If the stakes are indeed high and the deliberative process does work effectively, behaviour might well be different in citizen assemblies than in everyday political life. To begin with, assembly participants should be highly motivated to invest time and effort into the project and to do a good job. While free-riding might be the norm in politics as usual, a citizen assembly provides a strong set of incentives to get fully involved. Also, the assembly process provides ample opportunities to learn, think, and talk. Therefore, if motivation and opportunity are combined (Luskin 1990), the result should produce individuals with greater civic involvement and competence than normally observed.

1.4.3 Does it matter who does (and does not) participate?

No political activity entails universal participation. There are always people left standing on the sidelines, whether the behaviour is voting in an election, signing a petition, marching in a demonstration, becoming a member of a political party, joining a community or protest group, working for a campaign, or being elected as a delegate for constituents. Participation varies both in terms of scope and sources of exclusion. The first variation is obvious: the proportion of citizens who vote is vastly superior to the proportion who become members of a legislature. The second variation speaks to the reasons for abstention: people do not participate either because they do not want to (they lack interest), because they cannot (they lack time and/or money), because they were not asked (they lack an opening), or various combinations of all these (Verba et al. 1995). The consequence is a socio-economic participation divide: research indicates that participants tend to be more educated, more wealthy, and older (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Blais 2000; Putnam 2000). Most importantly, this unequal participation results in biased representation and responsiveness (Downs 1957; Verba et al. 1995; Bartels 2008). Consequently, authorities disproportionately hear and respond to relatively privileged citizens.

When a real-world deliberative democracy experiment is attempted, the organizers generally take great strides to minimize obstacles to participation and to
maximize representativeness. They can offer monetary incentives and compensations to offset potential losses of income, and childcare services to free-up parents’ schedules. However, one difficulty is never fully surmountable: self-selection. All deliberative processes involve some self-selection, even those identified as relying on random selection (Table 1.2). Deliberative polls try to convince all their potential participants contacted by telephone to take part in the weekend activities, but everyone is free to decline and many in fact do. In citizen assemblies, self-selection was even more extensive. Invitations to information meetings were distributed randomly and participants were drawn randomly among those interested, but, as in Athens, no one was offered a position unless they had expressed their interest. Is self-selection problematic for deliberative democracy?

We probe the role that self-selection and the resulting degree of representativeness played in our three cases. How well did citizen assemblies represent the voting age populations? Were their socio-demographic traits, attitudes, and behaviours similar? Was the outcome dictated by the composition of each assembly? Were participants biased against the status quo? Did they favour one particular option from the start? These questions are explored in Chapter 3.

1.4.4 How good are citizens’ political judgements?

In their natural habitat, citizens’ opinions exhibit instability, incoherence, and even whimsicality. First, individual opinions often fluctuate greatly over time (Converse 1964; Feldman 1989; Zaller and Feldman 1992). If one asks a person a question one day, and then repeats the same question a few weeks or months later, one is likely to obtain different answers, even on central and salient issues. People appear to respond randomly, as though they were ‘flipping a coin’ (Converse 1964: 243).9 Second, individual opinions are also weakly structured (Converse 1964; Butler and Stokes 1974; Luskin 1987; Kinder 1998). There is a lack of empirical consistency across conceptually related attitudes of the same level (e.g. issue positions), and between conceptually related attitudes of different levels (e.g. values and issue positions). Elites may have structured belief systems, but John and Jane Q. Public rarely do.10 Finally, the public’s collective opinion, while allegedly more stable and reasonable, can sometimes be swayed dramatically by transient factors. Why should support for spending on defence increase during international crises (Page and Shapiro 1992: ch. 6)? Why should president Bush’s

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9 Debates do persist about whether the instability is attributable to the nature of respondents’ attitudes (Converse 1970, 1980; Luskin 1987; Zaller 1992) or of their measurement (Achen 1975; Erikson 1979; Judd and Milburn 1980; Ansolabehere et al. 2008), but evidence of individual instability remains ubiquitous.

10 Again, objections have tended to focus on the role of measurement error (Judd and Milburn 1980; Hurwitz and Peffley 1985, 1987; Ansolabehere et al. 2008). Nevertheless, the dominant position is that incoherence in political opinions is rampant among the citizenry.
job performance rating jump by a whopping 40 percentage points in the days following 9/11? Why should governments be punished for acts of nature such as droughts, floods, and shark attacks (Achen and Bartels 2002)? Why should a person’s mood affect his evaluations of political candidates (Ottati et al. 1989)?

The sensitivity of opinions to changes in context is often understandable, but ‘not necessarily rational’ (Kuklinski and Quirk 2000: 161).

In citizen assemblies, developed opinions should be of higher quality. This improvement hinges on the competence that participants are expected to attain during the process. If assembly members become informed and sophisticated, then their views should also exhibit greater stability, coherence, and steadfastness. These expectations stem from research which ‘suggests that more-informed citizens (. . .) are more likely to hold stable opinions over time (. . .), are more likely to hold opinions that are ideologically consistent with each other (. . .), and are less likely to change their opinions in the face of new but tangential or misleading information (. . .) but more likely to change in the face of new relevant or compelling information’ (Delli Carpini 2005: 35).

In this book, we thoroughly investigate the quality of opinions in citizen assemblies. Chapter 4 examines the dynamics of preferences relating to electoral systems during the almost year-long proceedings. When did preferences develop and crystallize? How did they evolve over time? Was there individual and collective volatility? Was movement driven by sensible forces? Then, in Chapter 5, we turn our attention to the structure of individual and collective decisions reached by the assemblies. Were preferences consistent with members’ values and objectives? Did the level of consistency improve over time? Was consistency only present among the most informed participants? Did the assemblies make reasonable decisions? Lastly, in Chapter 6, we consider the possibility that the assemblies were affected by external influences. Did lobbying from political parties determine the outcome? Were assemblies influenced by biases of the expert teaching staff or the chair? Did they simply follow the advice expressed by the public during consultations? Were they coerced by a few persuasive assembly members? Together, these three chapters ascertain the degree of competence exhibited by citizen decision-making in extensive deliberative processes.

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11 This type of reaction, labelled a rally-around-the-flag effect, frequently occurs when a country is attacked or commits its troops to combat (Mueller 1973, 1994). As the personification of the nation, the leader suddenly merits new respect and moral support. While this effect has been specified and explained, it nevertheless constitutes a blatant overreaction to events.

12 In a similar vein, the construction of the questionnaire – the format, formulation, and order of items – can have a substantial influence on responses (Schuman and Presser 1981; Schwarz and Sudman 1992; Tourangeau et al. 2000). The survey does not simply measure crystallized opinions, it also shapes them.
1.4.5 Does participation produce better citizens?

Advocates of deliberative democracy have made interesting arguments about the consequences of political participation and deliberation (Pateman 1970; Thompson 1970; Mansbridge 1999; Gastil 2000; Morrell 2005). The claim is that they can improve citizens. Participation, particularly the more demanding forms, ought to develop social virtues such as democratic character, political awareness, political efficacy, a sense of cooperation, and a sense of community. However, empirical analysis of the effects of participatory and deliberative activities is limited and provides mixed findings. Evidence from deliberative polls indicates that people who take part do become more efficacious, sociotropic, and trusting (Fishkin and Luskin 1999; Luskin and Fishkin 2002). Conversations with diverse social networks enhance broadmindedness and tolerance (Mutz 2002, 2006). But the idea that election and campaign activities increase political efficacy has only been partially supported (Finkel 1985, 1987). And there are those who seriously question the impacts of such processes. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) argue that the positive effects of participating and deliberating are actually mostly limited to instances when substantial agreement already exists. Indeed, during ‘normal’ political circumstances, the effects may be negative, rendering participants infuriated and antagonistic.

Chapter 7 asks whether or not participation in a citizen assembly fosters citizenship. We determine the actual impact of involvement in this most intense deliberative process on various attitudes and values unrelated to the narrower question of electoral system preferences. Did assembly members become more interested in politics, more active in politics, more civic-minded, more open-minded, more tolerant, and more trusting? If the participants’ views were not systematically transformed during the almost year-long proceedings, then the claims of beneficial and/or detrimental effects are probably tenuous.

1.4.6 Can uninformed citizens, political parties, and governments trust informed citizens?

Traditional systems of representative democracy are thought to be suffering from crises of legitimacy. People are experiencing political malaise: they express greater distrust of governmental institutions and authorities (Nevitte 1996; Nye et al. 1997; Norris, 1999; Pharr and Putnam, 2000; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001, 2002; Dalton 2004), and engage less in various forms of political participation (Blais 2000; Gray and Caul 2000; Putnam 2000; Franklin 2004). While the sources of this political discontent and apathy have not been clearly identified, these symptoms have been documented as increasing over the last decades across various countries around the world.

Part of the rationale for embracing participatory and deliberative democracy is to inject some popular legitimacy into policymaking (e.g. Cohen 1989; Habermas
1996; Dryzek 2001; Gutmann and Thompson 2004). Yet the impact of the three citizen assemblies is questionable, for while they generated three different reform proposals, none were implemented. In the two Canadian cases, the proposals did not pass the referendum requirements set by the legislature; and the Dutch government simply ignored the other. Why? Should we conclude that citizen assemblies are bound to fail?

Chapter 8 explores how the assemblies’ decisions were received by key political actors (governments, political parties, interest groups, media, and the public) in an attempt to account for their lack of success. Were voters unaware that ‘ordinary citizens’ had proposed the reforms? Were they suspicious of the assembly’s legitimacy? Did the public fear change? Did politicians try to undermine the endeavour? Did the media ignore or attack the citizen assembly and its recommendation? We need to answer these questions to ascertain the value of citizen decision-making as a political tool.

1.4.7 Whether, when, and how should we let citizens decide?

The final chapter ties everything together. It returns to the general theoretical themes outlined in this section. We review and expand the insights provided by the various chapters about the logic and limits of power sharing, the benefits and pitfalls of participation, and the competence of citizens. The lessons that emerge are relevant for scholars and students interested in electoral systems, deliberation, public policy, institutions, political behaviour, and democracy.

1.5 WHAT DATA DO WE USE TO ANSWER OUR QUESTIONS?

Our analyses rely on many sources of data (see Table 1.3). First, and most importantly, there are surveys of assembly members themselves. Participants in all three citizen assemblies were interviewed with self-completed pen and paper questionnaires on numerous occasions. Assembly members were surveyed thirteen separate times in British Columbia, five times in the Netherlands, and four times in Ontario. In each case, the interviews spanned the entire process, with a baseline questionnaire completed before members met for the first time, and a post-assembly survey after all the work had been accomplished. The surveys varied in length: some contained upwards of 200 items, while others were composed of only a few questions. They covered a host of values, attitudes, and opinions. Significantly, question wording and ordering were almost identical across the three cases. These surveys allow us to uncover what the participants
of the citizen assemblies were thinking before, during, and after key moments of the proceedings. We use them throughout the book.

Content analyses of media coverage were conducted for all three cases. Every story in the main national and regional newspapers that mentioned electoral reform, electoral systems, or the citizen assembly was collected and coded. The British Columbia data spanned seven newspapers and seventeen months, the Ontario data covered ten newspapers and thirteen months, while the Dutch study included all major newspapers, some popular magazines, as well as some radio and television broadcasts over a period of sixteen months. All three studies encompass the entire assembly process (including the Canadian referendum campaigns). The Canadian content analyses were directed by Stuart Soroka at McGill University’s Media Observatory, while the Dutch examination of media coverage was carried out by a research team at the University of Amsterdam (Akkerman and van Santen 2007). These data provide information about the reactions of stakeholders throughout the proceedings and about the messages to which referendum voters were exposed.

Since the ultimate fate of two of the assembly reform proposals hinged on the support of the population, we conducted public opinion surveys during the three Canadian referendums. In British Columbia in 2005, a total of 2634 21-minute computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI) were conducted over four months. The survey started as a weekly rolling cross-section at the time when every household received a copy of the assembly’s report, and intensified to a daily

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13 The principal investigators of the 2005 British Columbia Electoral Reform Referendum Study were André Blais, R. Kenneth Carty, Fred Cutler, Patrick Fournier, and Richard Johnston. The fieldwork ran from 17 January to 16 May 2005. It was conducted by the Institute for Social Research at York University under the direction of David Northrup. The response rate is 51.9 per cent.
rolling cross-section during the last two weeks of the campaign. Four years later, during the second British Columbia referendum on STV, 1039 respondents were questioned over the last four weeks of the campaign, and the sample was released dynamically on a daily basis. In Ontario, a daily rolling cross-section of 1352 interviews was performed during the month-long official campaign period. With these survey data, we can assess the nature of the public’s opinions and knowledge concerning electoral reform and the citizen assembly, and track their evolution over time up until referendum day. In the Netherlands, no referendum was held. The only opinion poll data were collected in July 2006 (a few months after the assembly started). They deal with the campaign organized to inform people about the Burgerforum and public views towards the Dutch electoral system. When appropriate, we also draw upon general population statistics and results from national electoral studies.

A fourth data source consists of the evaluation reports, the teaching materials, and the technical reports produced by the citizen assembly organizations. This extensive documentation is crucial for describing how each assembly was structured and unfolded.

Armed with these diverse sources of evidence, we aim to provide a rigorous account of the three citizen assemblies and to draw the general lessons to be derived about citizens, governance, and democracy.

14 The principal investigators of the 2009 British Columbia Referendum Study were R. Kenneth Carty, Fred Cutler, and Patrick Fournier. The Institute for Social Research surveyed from 16 April to 11 May 2009. The response rate is 41.5 per cent.

15 The principal investigators of the 2007 Ontario Referendum and Election Study were André Blais, R. Kenneth Carty, Fred Cutler, Patrick Fournier, Richard Johnston, Scott Matthews, and Mark Pickup. Interviews were administered from 10 September to 9 October 2007 by the Institute for Social Research. The response rate is 45.5 per cent.
Why Citizen Assemblies and How did they Work?

It is axiomatic in government that hornets’ nests should be left unstirred, cans of worms should remain unopened, and cats should be left firmly in bags and not set among the pigeons. Ministers should also leave boats unrocked, nettles ungrasped, refrain from taking bulls by the horns, and resolutely turn their backs to the music.

Sir Humphrey Appleby, Yes Minister (1982)

It is one thing to let citizens decide. It is quite another to determine how they might go about it. When the idea to have a citizen assembly on electoral reform was first advanced, no one knew how it might be done for the simple reason that it had never been done before. In this chapter, we turn to considering why the assemblies were created and how they functioned. Only once this has been accomplished can we answer our questions about citizen competence and decision-making. Though the three assemblies had much in common, each reflected the distinctive context of its own political community. By describing in some detail the structure and operation of the citizen assemblies, we can develop a more complete understanding of the unique cases around which this study revolves. The material in this chapter also serves as a launching pad for those that follow. As it discusses how these assemblies worked, it raises issues that will be explored more extensively later on: notably the representativeness of the participants, the influence of the staff on decisions, the impact of lobbying and public consultations, and the reasons behind the rejection of the proposals by voters and governments.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about the assemblies is that they were citizen assemblies on electoral reform, a subject which politicians typically want to control themselves. Thus, we begin with a consideration of the origins of the assemblies before turning to an analysis of how they were organized and operated. The subsequent discussion then traces the assemblies’ activities chronologically through their selection, learning, consultation, deliberation, and decision-making phases before turning to the aftermath.
2.1 ELECTORAL SYSTEM CHANGE

Much of the scholarly literature on electoral systems has traditionally focused on their impacts upon phenomena such as levels of voter turnout, the number and nature of competing political parties, or the stability of legislatures and governments. However, in recent decades, researchers have started addressing the question of electoral system change (see e.g. Shugart 1992; Bawn 1993; Remington and Smith 1996; Boix 1999; Benoit 2004; Rahat 2004; Colomer 2005). In this line of research, it is the electoral system itself that is to be explained. The dominant strand in this work assumes that disciplined political parties try to shape the electoral systems to their advantage. The presumption is that their preferences are mainly centred on maximizing legislative seats and government power. In a paraphrase of Duverger’s law, this theory has been described as the ‘micro-mega rule’: large parties prefer small legislatures, small district magnitudes and small quotas, while small parties prefer large legislatures, district magnitudes, and quotas (Colomer 2004: 3). But others have strongly questioned the usefulness of assuming simple rationality, the predominance of seat-maximizing motivations, or the central position of unitary political parties (Van der Kolk 2007). Electoral systems change cannot always be studied apart from choices over other issues. In some instances, political parties prefer substantial changes that do not affect the distribution of seats (directly), parties sometimes split over electoral system change, and certain politicians are clearly motivated by ideological conceptions rather than seat-maximizing calculations (Bowler et al. 2008).

Our comparative study deals with three states that decided to take up the issue of electoral system change. By instituting a citizen assembly, each took the issue out of the hands of political parties and reduced their capacity to advance the narrow power-maximizing opportunities so beloved of political scientists theorizing about the process. Our three stories may add to our understanding of electoral system change by focusing on motivations that are not simply guided by seat maximization. They also reveal something of the values and orientations ordinary citizens bring to thinking about the appropriate principles that ought to govern such system changes.

2.2 ORIGINS OF CITIZEN ASSEMBLIES

Why were citizen assemblies instituted? By whom? How did they proceed? Answering these questions tells us something about the context in which each assembly was created and the decisions that ordered them. Although all three occurred within months of the others, they were not independently created. The
British Columbia assembly was the first and the precedents it set, and the lessons it offered, had direct and immediate impacts on the other two. We open with it.

2.2.1 British Columbia

British Columbia’s political system had long been bipolar: its competitive two-party system is a classic instance of the effects of a ‘first past the post’ system, as described in Duverger’s law. Since the 1950s, elections in the province had been dominated by two parties: until 1990 by Social Credit and a social democratic party (the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation later reorganized as the New Democrats), and since then by the New Democrats and the BC Liberals. These two large parties benefited from this system and any change to a proportional one would not be in their obvious electoral interest. That made the creation of a citizen assembly to consider electoral reform particularly unexpected and quite remarkable.

Why would a party in government relinquish one of its most important powers – deciding the rules by which it is elected to the legislature and office – to a body that was untested and unpredictable? This question surely must have been on the minds of many in premier Gordon Campbell’s government when he announced the formation of the world’s first modern citizen assembly. Campaigning in opposition, Campbell had promised a review of the electoral system as part of a larger programme of democratic renewal. His platform explicitly proposed the creation of a Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform whose recommendations would be subject to ratification in a public referendum. In opposition, Campbell and his Liberal party appeared to have little to lose by advocating reform to a system that seemed to be dysfunctional. During the previous (1996) election, the party had received the greatest share of the popular vote but won fewer seats than the New Democrats who were returned to power. That led many Liberals to clamour for change. Then, at the next election, the legislative opposition was effectively eliminated when the Liberals won all but two seats in the legislature with only 57 per cent of the vote. That confirmed a perception that the system was broken and change needed to be seriously considered (Carty et al. 2008).

Campbell directed his government on the basis that its campaign promises had to be honoured. The government immediately tied its hands and eliminated one of the premier’s powerful political weapons by fixing, for the first time in Canadian history, the date of the next election. Thus, it was no surprise when, one year into his mandate, Campbell announced the government’s intention to create a Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform. While policy proposals may reflect strategic interest, rational calculation, or necessary accommodations among coalition partners, this policy initiative had simpler foundations. Campbell had promised to do it when running for office. And when asked why he chose a citizen assembly as the vehicle, he reportedly said ‘because it’s the right thing to do’ (Gibson 2008). While it is not clear whether Campbell had any considered views on the issue of
electoral reform itself, there seems little doubt that the new premier was centrally responsible for the establishment of the citizen assembly.

Given that there had never been a citizen assembly of this sort, the government did not know how to go about creating one. Premier Campbell asked Gordon Gibson, a prominent political commentator and former politician, to prepare a report on the creation, composition, and selection of a citizen assembly.  

Gibson’s Report on the Constitution of the Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform (2002) laid the foundation for the British Columbia experiment and, as it developed, the subsequent citizen assemblies. Comprehensive in scope, the report discussed everything from the staffing requirements to the core processes of selection, public consultation, learning, and deliberation, and developed a working budget for the proposed assembly. Gibson recognized two principles – independence and legitimacy – as necessary for a citizen assembly and detailed how these potentially conflicting principles could be reconciled. Perhaps most crucially, his report clearly anticipated and discussed the importance of having an assembly that was recognizably representative of the population. Though he contemplated the possibility that some screening of potential assembly members might take place by fellow citizens or eminent persons such as judges, he ultimately decided against it and recommended a random selection process that would allow the invited to opt out. Gibson’s faith in the capacity of his fellow citizens would prove to be justified and constitutes a profoundly important legacy of his report.

Gibson’s recommendations around the terms of reference and structure of the assembly were unanimously approved by the provincial legislature in April 2003. However, the make-up of the assembly differed in two important respects from his proposals. First, the government decided to double its size, with two members from each electoral district rather than the one Gibson recommended. This allowed for an easy adoption of gender parity, since one man and one woman could be drawn from each district. The second change was to leave it to the chair to decide if there were to be vice-chairs, and in the end none were appointed. To enhance the legitimacy of the assembly, at least in the eyes of the political and party elites, a special committee of the legislature was created to vet the assembly’s chair and senior staff and to be available to offer all-party support to the assembly.

The government also moved to make good on the second part of their electoral reform by introducing, and passing, a bill to provide that any recommendation of the assembly would go to public referendum at the time of the next provincial general election (already fixed by law for May 2005). While referendums cannot be binding under Canadian constitutional provisions, the government made a firm commitment that, if it passed (and the government was returned), the proposal would be implemented. At the same time, the premier made it clear that neither he

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1 Gordon Gibson was a well-respected fellow of a national think tank located in British Columbia and a regular commentator on current events. In the past, he held the Liberal party’s only seat in the British Columbia legislature at a time when the party occupied a very minor role in provincial affairs.
nor his party would be taking any position on an assembly recommendation in order to clear the way for a discussion of its merits independent of the government’s partisan interests or views. This position, from which Campbell never deviated, would prove to have important implications when a referendum actually took place. One other aspect of the referendum plan would prove significant. The legislature decided that there should be a high and double acceptance standard. In practice, this meant that to pass a referendum would require 60 per cent support province-wide and achieve a majority in 60 per cent of the electoral districts. The former was justified by the fact that the very structure of the democratic process was at stake, the latter allegedly to protect the rural areas from the heavily populated urban areas in the south-western corner of the province. While many in the government caucus thought the second would be the highest hurdle, the opposite ultimately proved to be the case, evidence perhaps that sitting politicians may not always know their electorates.

2.2.2 The Netherlands

A variety of different proposals for electoral reform had been attempted over the previous fifteen years prior to the creation of the Dutch citizen assembly. Traditional mechanisms of electoral system change had been tried, including commissions and expert studies. But none of these conventional procedures led to substantial changes in the electoral system, which has been in use since 1917 (Van der Kolk 2007). The political party D66 (Democrats 66) made its membership in the 2003 coalition government contingent on advancing the issue. However, when a legislative proposal to change the electoral law designed by the D66 minister De Graaf failed because of lack of support within the coalition, he resigned from the cabinet. His successor from D66, Alexander Pechtold, decided to take a new track. A number of civil servants working on the file had heard about the British Columbia assembly when attending a conference of political scientists in California that had been organized to discuss the De Graaf proposal. They reported this to Pechtold who subsequently announced in July 2005 the creation of a Dutch version – the Burgerforum. He believed that this would enable him to find a way to change the electoral system while strengthening the image of his party as being the most ‘democratic’. Within the government, his plans were reluctantly accepted as the price of keeping D66 in the coalition.

As in British Columbia, the Dutch assembly followed a period of careful thought and preparation. Initial discussion and planning went beyond the specifics of the proposed assembly’s mandate. Experts offered advice about the structure and format as well as the administration and external communication functions of the assembly. An additional 100 stakeholders from ‘political, policy sectors, municipal authorities and the scientific, educational and communications sectors’ also delivered input on a range of issues that culminated in a discussion with the
minister (van Schagen 2007: 4). Significantly, the planning team also decided to consult closely with the British Columbians, and a delegation of four public servants (who ultimately administered the assembly) travelled to meet with both organizers and members of the first assembly. The result led them to model the Burgerforum on the British Columbia experience; adopting its multiphase process (selection–learning–consultation–deliberation), a random selection mechanism for ensuring that assembly members had diverse backgrounds, and the appointment of a strong and prominent independent person to assume the role of chair.

The plans for the Dutch civic forum differed in one important political way from its Canadian counterparts. The government decided that any recommendations from the assembly should simply be submitted to government. There was no intention to present it to the public in a referendum. No doubt, the country’s unhappy experience with the unsuccessful referendum on the European treaty in 2005 played a substantial role in this decision (Aarts and van der Kolk 2006).

2.2.3 Ontario

The origins of the Ontario Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform are similar to those of British Columbia. Like the assembly it emulated, the Ontario version was created largely because the leader of an opposition party believed that one of the most fundamental institutions of democracy ought to be examined by an independent body and he had campaigned for office on the issue. When they won a majority government in 2003, the Liberals brought in a number of changes related to democratic renewal including a ban on partisan government advertising, campaign finance reform, and fixed election dates. They had also promised to create a citizen assembly to examine the issue of electoral reform. Premier Dalton McGuinty followed Campbell’s example by proposing to hold a binding referendum on the assembly’s recommendation. McGuinty saw electoral reform not as an end in itself but as one way to renew sliding public confidence in democratic institutions. Although the announcement came one year into the government’s mandate (before the Netherlands’ Burgerforum was instigated), the assembly only began during the third year of the government’s term and reported in its fourth. As a result, the Ontario citizen assembly started and ended its activities after the Dutch assembly.

Ontario’s context differed from that in its sister province to the west. The province’s multiparty competition had produced significant policy lurches. A centrist Liberal minority government (1987) had been quickly followed by a New Democratic left-wing majority government in 1990 and then a sharp swing to the right under a majority Conservative government in 1995. This had been produced by its ‘first past the post’ electoral system, but the province had not suffered the same series of electoral anomalies (wrong winners and lopsided majorities) as British Columbia. For critics of the idea to hold a citizen assembly, this meant that there was less of a warrant to hold one. And unlike in British
Columbia, the report of the Select Committee of the legislature that recommended the citizen assembly in Ontario was not accepted unanimously by the parliament. With only the Liberals and New Democrats publicly in favour of considering electoral reform, for some the assembly appeared to be nothing more than the consequence of an ill-conceived party promise and a waste of tax dollars.

Ontario’s all-party Select Committee replicated Gibson’s planning work. As in British Columbia, its proposed assembly was designed to ensure it would be independent of the government and free to recommend any model for electing members of the legislature, including an endorsement of the status quo. Its membership was to be representative of the province (including, as in British Columbia, some aboriginal representation), and chosen on the basis of existing electoral districts. Any proposal for change would have to be ‘described clearly and in detail’, only limited by being consistent with the Constitution of Canada. This provision, copied from the British Columbia plan, ensured that in the event of a referendum, voters would know precisely what alternative electoral system was being proposed.

It was always intended that any assembly recommendation would go to the public in a referendum, but the Select Committee rejected the hurdles imposed in British Columbia and proposed that the threshold for any referendum simply be the traditional majority of 50 per cent + 1. The government appears to have been less sure, it ultimately decided to adopt the double standard that had been established in British Columbia: 60 per cent province-wide, with a majority in 60 per cent of the districts.

2.2.4 Why a citizen assembly?

In none of our three cases does the decision by a government to launch an electoral reform initiative appear to have been the result of party calculation of its long-term strategic interests. However, it is clear that the initiating party in each instance hoped to garner the benefits of ‘act contingencies’ by portraying itself as a party of progressive change (Shugart 2008: 16). In both Canadian provinces, opposition party leaders adopted electoral system change as a campaign issue (part of wider democratic reform agendas), and then felt obliged to be seen to keep their promises. In the Netherlands, electoral reform had always been an integral part of D66’s identity – it was even made a condition of their coalition participation – and the party was determined to demonstrate it could produce results.

But none of this necessarily entailed a citizen assembly. Indeed, no government had ever resorted to using one before. In British Columbia, the first to do so, the decision to create such an assembly appears to have been the result of a mix of factors.

One man had promised to put electoral reform on the front burner, but neither he nor

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2 Thus, the assembly could not simply recommend, for example, proportional representation. It was instructed to spell out the details of the specific system being proposed.
his party had very considered opinions on the subject or any preferred system. They might, of course, have resorted to appointing a committee of experts, but the country had spent the previous decade in a fruitless and painful attempt to revise the constitution, and those failures had led many to question the usefulness of leaving such subjects to the political class and their usual experts. In British Columbia, some commentators and activists were advocating constituent assemblies for such work, and premier Campbell’s decision to propose a citizen assembly reflected those debates. It is also clear that Campbell accepted the proposition that politicians were in a conflict of interest on the subject of electoral rules. He argued that such decisions ought to be the prerogative of the people and that it was simply right to leave it to them. The result was his decision to ask Gibson to tell him how to do it.

It was the success of the British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly that provided both the Dutch and Ontario electoral reformers with an alternative reform process. In the Netherlands, the failure of old approaches meant that D66 ministers were looking for new approaches and were open to suggestions from political scientists that they might consider the British Columbia model. In Ontario, a new government, priding itself on its democratic instincts, was anxious to find new ways to engage citizens and found the British Columbia example a ready-made template. In neither of those two cases was there an easy unanimous support for an assembly, but in both launching an assembly appeared to be one way to deal with existing political commitments.

There seems a measure of serendipity, or at least accident, in this story. For one thing, had Gordon Campbell not been the leader of the BC Liberals, the first citizen assembly would probably never have been created. Also, had the British Columbia assembly never existed or if it had been deemed a failure, it seems unlikely that either the Burgerforum or the Ontario assembly would have occurred. Or, if they had, they would likely have taken some different shape or direction. The demonstration effect of the British Columbia assembly was considerable, indicating that citizens could play an important role in choosing an institution as significant as their electoral system. It established the principle of randomness as a cornerstone of selection and recognized the importance of an in-depth education programme serving as the basis for their decision-making. All three assemblies differed in a number of ways – size, length of time, and the existence of a possible referendum – and in the balance of this chapter, we examine the similarities and differences in their structures and operations.

2.3 ORGANIZATION

The Gibson Report, which laid the foundation for the first citizen assembly, recognized that such an undertaking would require substantial support and assistance. One could not expect to put a group of strangers in a room and ask them to
come to a well thought-out decision about whether to recommend a new electoral system, a question to which most had probably never given any thought. The members of an assembly would need to meet, learn, consult, deliberate, and decide over many months. For the learning phase alone, rooms would have to be booked, a curriculum devised, briefing material selected, speakers recruited, and a flexible agenda that members could take ownership of created.

Central to this infrastructure would be the chair of the assembly. Describing the necessary leadership, Gibson noted: ‘He or she will have multiple duties – to be the public face of the Assembly, to manage the budget voted by the Legislature for the purpose, to see to the employment and general guidance of other staff, to exercise discretionary powers conferred by the mandate and, most importantly, to assist in guiding the work of the Assembly by facilitating relationships among the Members and securing adequate outside advice’ (2002: 21). A primary responsibility would be to recruit people responsible for research, learning, administration, and communications. Ultimately, each assembly depended upon a staff of about a dozen individuals.

2.3.1 The chairs

The British Columbia chair was nominated by the government, confirmed by a legislative committee, and then his appointment was unanimously ratified by the legislature (as Gibson had recommended). In both Ontario and the Netherlands, statutory instruments were used to appoint their respective chairs. While one might expect that the chair of a citizen assembly would be chosen from among its regularly selected membership, none of these assemblies adopted that principle. This reflected the governments’ recognition that creating and managing a unique and diverse organization (with no help from the government in order to maintain independence) would require an individual with proven leadership skills as well as immediate credibility with political parties, interest groups, and the media. Thus, while all three chairs were technically members of the assembly who could vote, it would be a misunderstanding of the role of the chair to see him or her as a ‘regular’ assembly member.

All the chairs came from quite different backgrounds. British Columbia’s chair, Jack Blaney, was a former university president with a distinguished record as an adult educator. He was particularly attracted to the assembly as an exceptional exercise in adult learning. The Dutch chair, theologian Jacobine Geel, was the only female chair. A columnist and television host, she was drawn to the project as an exercise in citizens’ dialogue. In Ontario, George Thomson was a former deputy minister and family court judge. He had considerable experience in providing

3 In the Dutch case, some of this responsibility was shared with a permanent civil servant who provided much of the initial planning and then the operational administrative leadership of the Burgerforum.
educational programmes for the legal community through his involvement in Canada’s National Judicial Institute.

As one would expect, these different backgrounds affected their leadership styles and how they worked with members as well as staff. Thomson recognized that his training as a lawyer meant he was most familiar with position-based negotiation and that for the assembly he had to shift to a process that would privilege value- and interest-based deliberation and discussion. Geel believed that her lack of knowledge of the subject allowed her to focus on the process dimensions of the assembly’s work. Blaney approached the role in an inherently optimistic fashion. His experience running adult education programmes (and perhaps even universities) had convinced him that ‘if you believe in people, they’ll always come through’. Both Thomson and Blaney sought to establish personal relationships with each member, calling them several times to ensure they were as engaged as they could or wanted to be. All three agreed that their biggest challenge was to keep the assembly processes moving in order to complete their task within the required time frames. In each case, the chairs played a pivotal role in establishing an environment where individuals with different skill sets could flourish.

There was one other important characteristic that the chairs shared: none had any substantive expertise in the policy area and none knew much about electoral systems as they started. This greatly strengthened their capacity to act as impartial leaders of their assemblies for no one could argue that they brought any preconceived opinions or preferences to the projects. At the same time, it meant that they, like the assembly members, were dependent upon the individual(s) charged with directing the learning phase that would lead to the final deliberative sessions.

2.3.2 Research/academic staff

In addition to the chair, the other staff person with regular contact with assembly members on substantive questions was the research/academic director. In this context, teaching about electoral systems required expertise in the subject matter but no commitment to, or recognizable preference for, any particular system. He – in all three cases, principal teaching was done by a male political scientist – had to develop and deliver the curriculum without leading assembly members to a specific conclusion. In British Columbia, the chair appointed R. Kenneth Carty the research director after consulting with informants around the province, a decision which was endorsed by a legislative committee that had to approve the assembly’s senior staff positions. In the Netherlands, Jan van Schagen, a civil servant who held a PhD and worked in a university, was chosen to be the in-house academic director, though the teaching was done by external consultants: two professors, one in political science and one in law (Henk van der Kolk and Henk Kummeling). In Ontario, three candidates were interviewed and Jonathan Rose was selected by the chair and executive director.
Thus, in each case, the assemblies relied on academic political scientists to provide leadership for the learning phase. Although this was done in-house, each assembly sought external expertise and advice on the curriculum from political scientists familiar with electoral systems, deliberation, and organizational behaviour (BCCAER 2004: 121; OCAER 2007a: 182; van Schagen 2007: 37). In British Columbia and the Netherlands, teaching was divided between two individuals (with one having primary responsibility), while in Ontario time constraints led that assembly to rely on one. In British Columbia and the Netherlands, people with a record of scholarly publications on electoral systems were employed, and they had relative autonomy in the creation of the learning curriculum. By contrast, Ontario deliberately chose an instructor who was not a specialist on electoral systems, and the development of the curriculum was a more collaborative exercise with the chair and an academic advisory group playing a more hands-on role than in the other cases.

The central issue for any organization that supports a deliberative group is its impartiality. As Gastil notes, good deliberation is dependent on a ‘balanced presentation of alternative perspectives’ (2006: 1). Was this achieved in the three citizen assemblies? Did members believe that the presentation of material was biased? Did they feel that the staff had their own preference? Were they led to some preordained conclusion? Answers to these kinds of questions are central to an assessment of the success of the assemblies. We return to them, and to the neutrality of the chair and teaching staff, in Chapter 6.

2.4 SELECTION PHASE

The selection procedure was a critical element in the assembly process, for it was designed to produce the representative character that was considered essential to establishing their legitimacy. All three used random selection from official records to provide names for the initial letters of invitation and then again to choose members from those who indicated a willingness to participate. The aim of using random selection in two stages was to produce assemblies as representative as possible of the population. According to British Columbia’s Terms of Reference, the membership was ‘to be broadly representative of the adult population of British Columbia, particularly respecting age, gender and geographical distribution’.4 In Ontario, fifty-two members were to be female and fifty-one members were to be male. Without specifying any parameter, the founding regulations did

4 Age, gender, and geography were adopted as criteria because they were the only characteristics available on the voters’ list – the only province-wide listing of citizens available from which to draw a sample.
mention that the composition of the assembly was to be a representative body of electors. Elections Ontario designed a process to take the electorate’s age distribution into account. In a letter to parliament, the Dutch minister of Administrative Renewal asserted: ‘for the legitimacy of the proposal produced by the Burger-forum, it is important that the assembly is made up broadly. Ideally, the members of the assembly should form an exact mirror image of Dutch society’.

The selection process started with a stratified sample from the voters’ lists in British Columbia and Ontario and the Municipal Personal Records Database in the Netherlands. Stratification was based on geography (electoral districts in British Columbia and Ontario; provinces in the Netherlands) and gender. In Canada, there were also provisions for aboriginal representation: one of the Ontario members had to be aboriginal, while a change was made to the original design in British Columbia to add two aboriginal members (bringing the total to 160).

An invitational letter was sent to the initial large sample of individuals (see Table 2.1). It stated that the recipient had been randomly selected as a potential participant in a citizen assembly on electoral reform. If they were interested, individuals were asked to respond indicating as much and their availability to attend a local information and selection meeting where their name would be included in the pool of eligible citizens. The letter pointed out the historic nature of the project, the time commitment expected of the members, and the chance to serve their province or country. As Table 2.1 shows, positive response to these initial letters was around 7 per cent. So the vast majority of people invited were not interested and/or available.

Those who expressed interest were strongly motivated to participate. In Ontario, over 95 per cent of individuals who were invited to attend a selection meeting accepted the invitation, notwithstanding the great distances many would have had to travel (OCAER 2007a: 43–4). For some, this amounted to a three-hour drive. In British Columbia, where distances would have been greater (in

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 2.1 Selecting Members for the Assembly</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source</td>
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<tr>
<td>Size of the electorate</td>
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<td>Initial letters</td>
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<td>Positive responses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Invited to attend meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Invitations accepted</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attended selection meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expressed willingness to serve</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of meetings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Members selected</td>
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</table>
some cases involving overnight journeys over mountains in late fall and early winter), over 87 per cent of those who confirmed they would attend a selection meeting did so (BCCAER 2004: 35–6). The very high degree of attendance at those meetings was common to all three assemblies.

Once at a selection meeting, prospective members heard presentations on the expectations and obligations of membership. They were told that prior knowledge was not a precondition and were reassured that most others had little or no knowledge of electoral reform. Members of the assembly secretariat staff conducted these meetings, answered questions, and allayed any concerns potential members might have about their knowledge or ability. At the end of the meeting, those present were given the opportunity to withdraw, but very few did. In British Columbia and the Netherlands, over 85 per cent of those who attended the information sessions agreed to submit their names for the drawing. The meetings in British Columbia and Ontario concluded with names being drawn from a hat or ballot box. In Ontario, alternates were also chosen in case anyone dropped out prior to the first meeting (none was required). In the Netherlands, the members were selected after all the meetings were held. To publicize the Burgerforum, this was done in an Internet broadcast, but the first draw had to be annulled when it was discovered that the company organizing the draw had made some errors in the provincial stratification. A second draw, this time in the presence of the Minister, was more successful.

In Chapter 3, we return to the question of how successful this process was in producing representative assemblies. That will allow us to consider the reasons for seeking representativeness and the meaning it brought to the assemblies.

2.5 LEARNING PHASE

Most citizens in democracies know little about the intricacies of electoral systems – indeed many have a very limited understanding of their own system, let alone that of others. In this regard, the members of the three citizen assemblies on electoral reform were quite typical, and they freely recognized as much. When asked at the start of their work ‘how informed about electoral systems do you feel?’, the average member gave himself or herself a failing grade. On a 0–10 scale, British Columbians scored 4.4, Ontarians 4.3, and the Dutch just 2.9 (though their question asked about ‘foreign electoral systems’). An extensive learning phase

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5 We do not have comparable data for the Ontario assembly but, impressionistically, the proportion was also high there.
6 When asked only about their national electoral system, the Dutch average was higher at 5.8.
was thus necessary before any debate about the most appropriate electoral system could take place. All three citizen assemblies were planned accordingly.

2.5.1 Structure and content

Each assembly devoted six (residential) weekends, spread over several months, to the learning phase (though in the Dutch case some of this training overlapped with the consultation phase). These learning weekends required members to travel from their homes and stay together in hotels.\(^7\) As Table 2.2 shows, there was considerable similarity in the curriculum of all three, in part because both the Netherlands and Ontario started with the British Columbia programme and made appropriate modifications to suit the context within which they were working. The British Columbia model reflected many of the suggestions offered in the original Gibson Report (2002: Appendix 3).

An in-depth learning phase was needed not only to allow sufficient time to understand the implications of different voting systems but also to convey the complexity of the topic. Electoral systems can be understood in two broad ways. One way is to see them through their constituent elements or their *mechanics*. This is usually understood as the district magnitude (the number of representatives per electoral district), the ballot structure (whether the electoral choice is categorical or ordinal, and whether the choice is for a party or a candidate), and the formula

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weekend</th>
<th>British Columbia</th>
<th>The Netherlands</th>
<th>Ontario</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction to the Citizens’ Assembly</td>
<td>Elements of an electoral system</td>
<td>Introduction to the Citizens’ Assembly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Elections and parliamentary government</td>
<td>Electoral system families</td>
<td>Political representation/government and the legislature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Plurality and majority systems</td>
<td>Consequences of electoral systems</td>
<td>Plurality and majority systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>PR and mixed systems</td>
<td>Some learning and consultation</td>
<td>PR and mixed systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Changing electoral systems</td>
<td>Some learning and consultation</td>
<td>Electoral systems around the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Options for public discussion</td>
<td>Some learning and consultation</td>
<td>Simulations/system design</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^7\) In Canada, this could involve (winter) journeys of several hours to Vancouver and Toronto respectively. The smaller distances in the Netherlands allowed Dutch members to get to their meetings in The Hague and Zeist more easily.
(whether the winners are decided by plurality, majority, or proportional rules). Alternatively, electoral systems can be understood by their outcomes or consequences. This approach considers the different modes of representation under different systems and the consequences they have for the character of democracy, answering questions such as: How likely is a system to produce majority or minority governments? Will there be a greater likelihood of single-party or multiparty governments? How many and what kind of parties are likely to gain representation under particular systems? Is representation likely to be interest-based or territorially based? Both of these approaches had to be taught if assembly members were to fully understand the mechanics as well as the consequences of the decisions they were to make. Members would have to comprehend how electoral systems trade off competing goods and that no one system can deliver everything (Katz 1997).

The curriculum was very similar in the two Canadian assemblies. Both began the learning phase with an introduction to Westminster-style parliamentary government, explaining the functions of parliament, the party system, and principles of representation. Weekends 3 and 4 were dedicated to an examination of the broad families of electoral systems (plurality, majority, proportional representation (PR), and mixed). Examples were described according to both their outcomes (what kind of government and legislature are produced) as well as their mechanics (ballot structure, district magnitude, and formula). Unlike a citizens’ jury, the learning programme did not rely on advocates for specific systems. Rather, the staff outlined the strengths and weaknesses of each in a neutral fashion. The assessments used criteria commonly used to analyse electoral systems, such as the extent to which they offer voter choice, stable government, effective parliament and parties, accountability, and increased voter participation. In the penultimate weekend of the learning phase, members heard from international experts on electoral systems who described the features of systems in different countries, as well as some of the lessons from places – such as New Zealand – that had recently changed their electoral system. In the final week in British Columbia, members turned their attention to preparing a report that could be widely distributed as a basis for the public consultations to follow. In Ontario, no such preliminary report was required and their final week was devoted to simulations showing members how changing variables of a system affect electoral results. In both cases, the chairs reminded members that the assemblies were still in the ‘data collection’ phase of their work and discouraged them from making a precipitous choice. As Chapter 4 indicates, however, this does not mean that some members had not already developed private preferences.

The content of the training in the Dutch assembly utilized three main modules: the (mechanical) elements of electoral systems, the combination of those elements in different families of systems, and the consequences of each of these families. Quizzes, voting simulations, as well as presentations by members of the Dutch parliament complemented the formal lectures. As with the other assemblies, a
members-only website complemented formal learning in the classroom. Whereas this learning phase was discrete in the Canadian cases, in the Netherlands it spilled over into the following period when the Burgerforum was holding its public consultation meetings.

There was a common structure to these learning weekends. They usually began with a welcome from the chair who made an opening statement, allowing members to raise any questions about outstanding issues, the weekend’s curriculum, or other business. Days would begin at 9 or 9:30 in the morning and go until after 4 in the afternoon, with breaks for refreshments and lunch. Plenary lectures – usually by the academic director/chief research officer – laid the foundation for broad themes or key concepts. They were followed by small-group sessions of constantly varying composition. These sessions were moderated by specially trained graduate students in political science (British Columbia) or political science and upper-year law students (the Netherlands and Ontario). In all three assemblies, these facilitators would meet before the weekend with the secretariat’s academic team to go over the proposed plans for the small-group sessions. Activities were designed to stress active learning and interaction among the members within the groups. Often, the purpose of the small-group sessions would be to reinforce ideas of the plenary, but occasionally the groups would report back on an issue they had discussed. These sessions were designed partly as tutorials, and also recognizing that people learn in different ways and in different venues.

With such a varied group of participants, few of whom had the foundation usually expected when learning about electoral systems, teaching methods and materials had to be appropriate for adult learners. Quoting Albert Einstein, one member in Ontario described the material as having to be as ‘simple as possible but not simpler’. While much of the discussion was necessarily somewhat abstract and theoretical, such as the meaning and nature of representation, other elements were inevitably highly detailed and specific, such as the calculation of the Hare quota. Every assembly used the same text as the basis for its programme. Given its organization, breadth, and clear approach, David Farrell’s Electoral Systems: A Comparative Introduction (2001) served as the primary textbook. In the Netherlands, the Burgerforum staff had it translated into Dutch for their members. While the book is both rigorous and remarkably well written, one British Columbian took it upon himself to ‘translate’ it into what he believed was more accessible prose (to the ‘ordinary person’). In Ontario, Farrell’s book was supplemented by a sixty-page book commissioned for the project. It discussed the families of electoral systems and evaluated them in light of the assembly’s mandate and principles. A third book, Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook (2005), was used as a supplementary text in Ontario to provide visual representations of ballots, brief narratives of recent elections, and for its compendium-like structure.

The texts were not the sole source of academic material. Recognizing that a book is not the best form of information for many, fact sheets, presentations,
summaries, government reports, and bibliographies were an integral part of the data members received. This amounted to a wealth of information in a variety of forms. Ballots were obtained or reproduced in all three assemblies to help provide tangible illustrations of how voting took place in other countries. Interactive, hands-on techniques such as simulations (Ontario and the Netherlands) or quizzes (the Netherlands) complemented lectures and other didactic methods. Members could (and often did) ask the academic staff questions on the members-only website. Informal evening sessions that were held in all three jurisdictions provided a valuable opportunity to review the lessons learned during the day. These ad hoc meetings were often organized and run by members themselves, allowing them to take ownership of their learning and encouraging the very important function of peer teaching.

One of the consequences of a residential learning programme (where members are away from family and friends for a weekend at a time) is the creation of nodes of expertise. Members who were computer literate ran simulations of election results and altered design variables to see how the outcomes might change. Others who had a propensity for data collection would develop spreadsheets that could be sorted according to different variables. Still others acted as librarians, searching out information and resources to share with other members. And individuals who favoured learning through conversation talked through material with colleagues.

2.5.2 Did members learn?

Our evidence indicates that citizen assembly members learned a great deal about the subject of their mandate. First, they were asked to gauge their own knowledge of electoral systems on a 0–10 scale. The means are reported in Table 2.3. Scores in the

<table>
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<th>British Columbia</th>
<th>The Netherlands</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Start</td>
<td>End</td>
<td>Start</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-reported ratings (0–10, mean)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information about electoral systems</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information about national electoral system</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>5.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information about foreign electoral systems</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factual knowledge (% correct)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country where candidate with most votes wins</td>
<td>64.0</td>
<td>90.0</td>
<td>47.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country with two votes (party, candidate)</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>68.7</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country where voters rank candidates</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>78.7</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country with proportional representation</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>85.3</td>
<td>20.0</td>
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baseline questionnaire, before the first meetings of the assemblies, were rather low, most below the scale’s midpoint. By the end of the learning phase, members of each of the assemblies reported a much greater confidence in their knowledge of electoral systems. The means almost doubled, increasing by more than 3.5 points in each case (with the not surprising exception of Dutch reported knowledge of their domestic system, though that too showed a marked improvement).

Of course, this greater sense of confidence might be a misguided feeling resulting from participation in the intensive information sessions that were a virtual political science boot camp. However, more objective evidence also shows that many assembly participants became very informed about electoral systems. Several times during the assembly process, we asked them questions to measure their factual knowledge. These questions challenged them to name (a) a country where (‘like in Canada’) the candidate with the most votes wins; (b) a country where people have two votes, one for the party they prefer and one for the local candidate they prefer; (c) a country where voters get to rank the candidates in their order of preference; and (d) a country where they have PR (‘like in the Netherlands’), that is, the percentage of seats a party gets is about the same as the percentage of votes it got. Table 2.3 presents the percentage of correct answers to these four knowledge questions at two moments for each assembly: before the assembly began its activities, and during the mid-year break after the completion of the learning phase.

As the data reveal, assembly members initially knew very little about other electoral systems. In the first wave survey, the only item that received close to a majority of correct answers was naming a country using ‘first past the post’ (typically, members cited the United States or the United Kingdom). Perhaps that is not startling for Canadians, since they use that system and are close to the United States. But this was also the most well-known item in the Netherlands. Knowledge of other items was dismal. Rarely more than a quarter of assembly participants could name a country with two votes, a country that ranks candidates, or a country with PR. By the end of the learning phase, however, knowledge levels had drastically improved. In many instances, the proportion of correct answers jumped by more than 50 percentage points. Among each assembly, a majority, often overwhelming, could accurately name an example of each electoral system. In only one instance did less than two-thirds of assembly members respond correctly: just half the Dutch participants could name another country using PR. This may reflect the fact that discussions in the Dutch assembly often stressed that PR in the Netherlands is quite unique, thus inciting people to state they did not know a ‘similar PR system’. Overall, knowledge generally reached close to four-fifths of respondents.

8 Though, many Dutch Burgerforum members could also name a country with two votes, perhaps due to the close proximity of Germany’s MMP system.
Thus, both self-reported measures and more objective knowledge tests tell a similar story. Anecdotal evidence also indicates that many participants became quite proficient about the topic. They were asking very tough questions and having highly sophisticated discussions. Technical conversations and debates continued during breaks, meals, social outings, and on web forums. Observing the assemblies, it was hard not to be impressed with the capacity of citizens to learn, absorb, and understand the intricacies of a subject to which most had given little, if any, prior thought.

How did participants learn? What worked? What did not? We cannot answer these questions decisively, for their programmes involved multiple elements – personal study, plenary lectures, and small-group discussions – that overlapped over time. A tentative indication is provided by self-reports. The British Columbia and Ontario assembly members were asked at the end of the learning phase how useful they thought different elements of the programme had been to their personal learning. Similar questions were given to the Dutch members at the conclusion of the whole process. Table 2.4 suggests that formal presentations by experts – both on the staff and visiting – were the most useful activity in helping members accumulate and integrate information. The two other central components of the formal learning programme – small-group discussions and personal study – were also considered important activities. The various forms of conversations with staff, members, and other people, whether in person or online, were rated as less useful.

But however they learned, it is clear that many assembly members became very knowledgeable about electoral systems and how they worked. The extent to which this new information translated into non-erratic and structured preferences about electoral systems is explored in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2.4 Usefulness of Activities for Learning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>British Columbia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plenary lectures by staff</td>
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<td>Plenary talks by visitors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Small-group discussion sessions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal study</td>
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<tr>
<td>Informal conversation with other members</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plenary discussion by whole assembly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Informal conversations with staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation with family, friends, neighbours</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion on the web forum</td>
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Members were asked to ‘rate the following activities in terms of what was most useful for learning’. The scale spanned 1–7, where ‘1’ means least useful and ‘7’ means most useful. Means are reported (with ranks in parentheses).
By the end of the learning phase, assembly members had developed the knowledge they would need to begin their analysis and assessment of their society’s electoral system needs. But that was just the first half of their preparation. They had yet to know their fellow citizens’ opinions about electoral reform. The Gibson conception of the assembly process also involved these representative citizens consulting widely with those they represented. Included in their terms of reference and mandate was an instruction to do just that – to hold a series of consultations so that there could be public input into their deliberations and decision-making.

Scholars of deliberative democracy take public consultation to be an essential part of decision-making. Gutmann and Thompson (2004) make the theoretical argument that deliberative democracy demands a public and transparent process in order to establish the authenticity and legitimacy of the exercise. From a practical perspective, Catt and Murphy see the need for public consultation as a consequence of recognizing ‘the policy-making process as a forum for weighing competing preferences and priorities rather than as a procedure for uncovering hidden and incontestable truths’ (2003: 408). Consulting is thus used to improve the policy process by increasing the information or the range of perspectives available to decision-makers. Essentially, public consultation is intended to serve several purposes. It can strengthen relationships between decision-makers and citizens thereby increasing the legitimacy of the policy (Barber 1984); it can allow the public an opportunity to provide input into policy options (Arnstein 1969); and it can broaden the range of stakeholders involved in policy development (Irvin and Stansbury 2004).

All three assemblies organized a broad and vigorous consultation programme. In British Columbia, a decision was made (by the staff) to ensure there would be an opportunity for all interested citizens to participate in a meeting within a reasonable distance of their home. Responding to demand, some of it stimulated by the assembly members in their local communities, fifty public hearings were ultimately organized across the province in May and June 2004. By the time they were completed, assembly members had heard 363 separate presentations from the 2851 attendees (BCCAER 2004: 71–9). In Ontario, forty-one meetings (plus four outreach focus groups for some hard-to-reach social segments) were held over the winter months from November 2006 to January 2007. They featured 501 formal and informal presentations made by the 1973 citizens in attendance (OCAER 2007a: 85–9). Both these assemblies’ meetings were structured to connect citizens to the assembly, so each one included a number of assembly members who could report what they heard to their colleagues.9

9 In British Columbia, members voted to have an additional full weekend meeting at the end of the consultation stage to discuss what they had heard in the public hearings. At this meeting, held in the northern part of the province, there was also a full review of the web submissions that had been received to that point.
In British Columbia, members attended at least one meeting in some part of the province they had never previously visited in order to expose them to the diversity of views that characterize the province’s population. The central focus of most of these public meetings was the presentations made by the public and the question/discussion period they invariably prompted. Secretariat staff took minutes and ensured that summaries of the sessions appeared on the assemblies’ websites.

Electoral systems are complex and detailed discussion can quickly descend to confusing detail, so it is not surprising that, aside from a few presentations by electoral system enthusiasts, most presentations centred on broad themes (such as the nature or desirability of local representation) or principles (such as proportionality). In both provinces, the majority of presentations favoured some kind of change: 92 per cent of the presentations in British Columbia advocated some type of reform, while in Ontario the proportion was 90 per cent (BCCAER 2004: 75; OCAER 2007b: 2–3). It seems clear that individuals concerned with the organization and fairness of the province’s electoral politics saw these hearings as an opportunity to express their views. Few favouring the status quo bothered to attend.

The Dutch assembly’s consultation phase, which went from May to August 2006, was different from the other two. There, consultation took the form of eighteen regional debates attended by 740 citizens. Twelve of these were organized in collaboration with the Dutch Centre for Political Participation. Each meeting was structured around a main debate question asked at the beginning and the end of the evening: “Are you of the opinion that changes need to be made to the electoral system of the Second Chamber?” Six agree/disagree propositions supplemented this primary question and allowed those attending to articulate their views about the electoral system (van Schagen 2007: 20–1).

In addition to the public meetings, the assemblies constructed websites which individuals could visit to learn about assembly activity. The sites also allowed visitors to send written submissions on either specific models of electoral systems or simply expound on the values that they believed should underpin any decision. By posting submissions as they were received, the sites created an ongoing public debate. In some instances, individuals reading others’ submissions were motivated to either argue with them or reconsider their positions in subsequent contributions. For example, the British Columbia site (www.citizensassembly.bc.ca) had almost 51,000 different visitors from 151 countries. Ultimately, 1603 formal submissions were received, summarized, and reviewed by groups of assembly members. In Ontario, 1039 proposals were submitted (www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca). In many cases, the submissions were brief or repetitive – one common format in the British Columbia assembly simply read ‘I like MMP’ – suggesting they came from an organized group, but members soon found their way to those with more detail. The Dutch assembly attempted an innovative real-time consultation session online where members of the public could interact with assembly members via the Internet. The Web was also used to facilitate early discussion among assembly members themselves on a members-only web forum. It proved a valuable tool as
they began the task of filtering information and ideas in anticipation of the deliberation phase.

Table 2.5 reveals something of the assembly members’ responses to the consultation phase. Though they believed (and sometimes complained) that the submissions at the hearings and on the Web were often very repetitive, they also found the process interesting, informative, and helpful. In the two Canadian cases, meetings across such geographically large political systems provided an important opportunity for members to raise awareness of the assembly in their communities and to hear what interested fellow citizens had to say. It may also have helped to make the assembly more legitimate, giving it a public face, and demonstrating that this was a genuinely independent citizen-driven endeavour.

If members found the meetings helpful, one important element of this was to instil confidence in their newly acquired expertise. When confronted by citizens advocating some electoral change, many members quickly discovered that they now knew far more about the actual specifics of the systems being discussed than those making the presentations. The public hearing process, at least in Canada, left the members with an increased sense of personal legitimacy, reinforcing how well prepared they were for the task of deliberation. The widespread call for change that the Canadians heard was understood as just that, and members felt free to use their new knowledge to determine just what sort of system would generate desirable changes.

Did the consultation phase have a decisive impact on the assemblies? Were their final decisions influenced and shaped by all they heard and read in this phase of the proceedings? This possibility is investigated in Chapter 6.

### 2.7 DELIBERATION AND DECISION-MAKING PHASE

The learning phase provided the necessary foundation of knowledge for deliberation. During this period, no electoral system was excluded as the merits and
limitations of each family and type were explored. The consultation phase that followed was important as a legitimating exercise, but it too was not about any specific alternative because none yet existed. Up to this point, members had not even begun to deliberate formally as a body, since they had not been required to express preferences nor make decisions. It was assumed that, as in other deliberative exercises, individuals do not start with a clear and coherent understanding (Button and Ryfe 2005: 28). Preferences were to emerge and take shape during the deliberative discussions. The story of when preferences developed and what factors motivated them is discussed elsewhere in this book (Chapters 4 and 5 respectively). Here, we sketch out the issues, votes, and decisions of the deliberation phase in each assembly.

A distinctive feature of the assemblies was that they had to come up with a specific policy recommendation. Unlike deliberative polls which are mainly about capturing informed private preferences, the assemblies were designed to make a recommendation on the basis of a collective preference. Each assembly had to go beyond simple deliberation and find an aggregative procedure for identifying its preference and articulating a recommendation. Since procedure matters in shaping the outcome of any aggregative process, it is important to note what procedures were adopted by the assemblies and then reflect on the participants’ evaluation of them.

The route from deliberation to decision followed a similar path in all three assemblies. It started with a discussion of the important values the electoral system should meet, then narrowed the consideration of electoral system options to those that met the identified criteria, moved to constructing detailed models of these options, and then concluded by evaluating alternatives against the existing system to make a final decision. Of course, deciding how to decide over the options was important in all three assemblies. Each one agreed that an absolute majority would be the formal decision rule for final decisions, but each sought an outcome that reflected a broader consensus and fostered continuing discussion rather than (parliamentary-style) debate in an attempt to reach it.

In British Columbia, the deliberation phase began with members prioritizing the values they deemed important in an electoral system. Three were identified as central: voter choice, proportionality, and local representation. The academic staff suggested that these three values were compatible with some system families but not others. The assembly therefore decided to dismiss majoritarian systems (which do not deliver proportional results) and list-PR systems (which are at odds with local representation). This left them with mixed member proportional (MMP) and the single transferable vote (STV) as the system types best able to incorporate all three of the valued dimensions. To evaluate the appropriateness of such different systems, which can take many forms in practice, the assembly decided to construct a version of both that might plausibly be recommended to the public. That process took two weekends. Constructing a model STV system was not difficult, as it largely involved decisions about district magnitude and ballot structure. Creating an MMP model took a bit longer, since some fifteen or sixteen separate, but
interrelated, decisions had to be made about its two parts (the local district side and party list side) as well as the rules linking them. At each stage of the model-building process, assembly members were returning to their considerations of voter choice, proportionality, and local representation, discussing how their decisions were congruent with them, and what trade-offs among them were involved. It has to be said that the strong preference of many for voter choice (see Chapter 4) led to a particularly complex MMP model.

By the fourth weekend of the deliberative phase, the assembly was ready to choose between its two alternative systems. Whichever system came out ahead would then be compared to the existing single member plurality (SMP) system. Members first met in small groups to start their conversation and rehearse their arguments. In the following plenary session, the discussion was structured with individuals making the case, in turn, for one of the systems and then the other. The debate was not only extensive, principled, passionate, but also respectful and conducted at a high level, with several participants arguing the assembly should rally behind the consensus position. At its conclusion, it was decided to hold a secret ballot that saw STV preferred to MMP by a 4:1 ratio (123–31). The assembly returned the next morning to consider the merits of STV as opposed to the current system. After another discussion and debate, the vote was 142–11 in favour of the STV model. The final decision was to determine whether they felt confident enough to recommend the proposed STV system to the public, thus ensuring a referendum. There was little doubt about that outcome – 95 per cent of assembly members voted to do so.

In the Netherlands, the assembly members began by selecting the strong and weak aspects of the current system and identifying the main functions of a desired electoral system. The most important statements centred on proportionality, simplicity, the existence of a single nationwide district, and the place of political parties. By contrast, regional representation and a reduction in the number of parties were seen as substantially less desirable. All members were invited to suggest alternative electoral systems after the consultation phase and in the first weeks of the deliberation phase. The staff merged all proposals into four alternative systems. Members were invited to amend this list, and a few took advantage of this possibility. The assembly ended up with six alternatives, all of which were proportional: three modifications of the present system, an MMP system, a system which would allow voters to express a preference for coalitions, and a rather complex system in which parts of the legislature were elected every two years.

Because the Dutch civic forum had to choose between several options, it was decided to use a sequential run-off voting system, where the option receiving the fewest votes would be eliminated in subsequent balloting. This would go on until two options were left, these two would be discussed extensively, and the winning option would compete with the status quo. Members quickly dropped the more complicated systems and the MMP system. The three remaining options were all basically straightforward list-PR systems. Partly because of strategic voting, the assembly
then decided to reject a system where voters would have been allowed to cast a party vote and a preferential vote for a candidate of another party. In this rejected system, the preferential vote would not have affected the distribution of seats but would have changed the distribution of seats within parties. Because a large group supporting the option that was ultimately selected was afraid of this alternative, some tactically shifted their support to their second preferred choice for one round.

The Dutch assembly thus ended up with two options: one list-PR system introducing a choice between a party vote and a vote for a candidate, and another keeping the current system with some minor modifications (i.e. changing the formula from d’Hondt to Hare). The first system was favoured with 83 per cent of the votes. In the final decision, this alternative competed with the status quo and was selected with the support of 88 per cent of Burgerforum members.

In Ontario, the identification of the assembly’s values resulted in the selection of the same three criteria as in British Columbia (local representation, proportionality, and voter choice). To advance their discussion, members determined which systems they thought best represented those values. This was done using a preferential vote where members ranked all electoral systems. The result was much the same as in the first assembly, with MMP and STV (in that order) identified as the two most preferred alternatives. At that stage, the assembly proceeded to design models of those two electoral systems that they believed would be suitable for their province. Ontario members had a different set of design opportunities than their British Columbian colleagues, for they were not constrained by the size of the existing legislature. This made constructing an MMP system somewhat more complex but at the same time somewhat easier. It now involved extra (potentially controversial) decisions about the total size of the legislature but that, in turn, made the trade-offs between local representation and proportionality potentially less onerous. The assembly wrestled until the last minute with tricky technical questions about ‘overhang’ seats, but it finally agreed on an acceptable MMP model. There was less difficulty with its STV model, about which fewer members seemed enthusiastic.

As in British Columbia, the assembly’s key debate came down to a discussion about the comparative merits of the two alternative systems. In this instance, however, MMP prevailed by a 3:1 margin (75–25). When compared to the existing system, the Ontarians also preferred their alternative (86–16). Ultimately, 92 per cent of assembly members voted to recommend MMP to the population in a referendum.

In all three assemblies, the concluding vote showed overwhelming support for the final recommendation. But it is important to ask if the participants believed these outcomes had been achieved reasonably. Some of our survey data, reported in Table 2.6, speak to this issue. First, very lopsided proportions felt that all assembly members had an equal opportunity to express themselves during the discussions. They also clearly believed that their views were treated respectfully by their peers. And in Ontario, where participants were also asked to judge the fairness of the decision process, most responded positively. Finally, crushing
majorities were satisfied with the decisions that had been taken by the assemblies. Most impressively, satisfaction with the assembly’s decisions topped 80 per cent among those who were on the losing sides of the debates (i.e. those who voted for a different alternative system and those who voted for the current system). The fact that those whose preference had not been endorsed by the assembly rallied to the wider group’s decision suggests members considered the deliberative and decision-making process had been conducted in a just and equitable way.

Citizen assemblies have been presented as an ultimate application of deliberative democracy. According to the ideal, participants in a decision-making body should exchange arguments about preferences, should refer to some general principles, and should adjust previously held opinions according to these arguments and principles. This sketch suggests the citizen assemblies met many of the deliberative democrats’ expectations, but we will return to examine the evolution of preferences over time and the sources of movement (in Chapter 4), the relationships between these final decisions and the principles that allegedly drove them (in Chapter 5), and the role of outside influences (in Chapter 6).

### 2.8 INTERESTED AND ENGAGED CITIZENS

All three citizen assemblies were charged to do something that had never been accomplished before: take a group of ordinary citizens and challenge them to assess their political communities’ electoral system and, if they found it wanting, to propose a concrete alternative. All three completed the task on schedule and within budget, and they produced reports that commanded a broad basis of support. Here, we briefly consider the members’ response to the challenge they were offered and speculate on some of the basic reasons that explain it.
It is clear that the prospect of serving on a citizen assembly generated some excitement even before it had ever gathered. This was evident at local selection meetings. Some individuals whose name was picked randomly at the end of the evening reacted as if they had won the jackpot: jumping up and down, screaming or crying in joy. Those who had come long distances only to be disappointed by not being chosen sometimes appealed to organizers to place them on an alternate list. An uninformed spectator would never have guessed that this recruitment process was for a project that would lead these men and women to spend weeks of their lives away from friends and family working on what many might see as a dry and complex policy topic. Thus, it seems clear that when offered such an opportunity to contribute to important public decisions, some people are motivated to invest large amounts of time and effort.

Moreover, it appears that all three assemblies managed to maintain this high motivation among their members throughout the very long proceedings. There are several indications of this. Organizers of the first citizen assembly anticipated that they might have a number of dropouts, especially when participants came to realize the extent of the sacrifice and effort they were going to have to make. Still, only one person quit in British Columbia, while in Ontario there was not a single withdrawal. In the Netherlands, the civic forum ended with six fewer members than the 143 it started with: four quit for personal reasons, while two left at the beginning because the process was too time-consuming for them. Also, attendance was near perfect. It hovered around 95–99 per cent in all three assemblies. Members missed meetings for only the most compelling reasons – getting married, delivering a baby, having an operation, or burying a loved one. The woman who missed a meeting because she was giving birth was back at the following session two weeks later and received a great round of applause from her colleagues. Furthermore, assembly members quickly became actively involved in ‘extracurricular’ activities at their own initiative. They gave media interviews, wrote op-ed letters to the press, and made presentations to local community groups and schools. One individual had large signs put on his pickup truck advertising the British Columbia assembly as he travelled up and down Vancouver Island.

A high level of enthusiasm for the assembly work is also apparent in the responses of members to our surveys. Table 2.7 shows that, over the entire span of the proceedings, great proportions of individuals felt that the project was important, that they were not wasting their time, and that the next step was exciting. More tellingly, even at the end of the year-long process, when participants knew exactly how much time and effort had been required of them, views remained very positive.

Only a handful regretted getting involved (2 per cent in British Columbia and 6 per cent in Ontario), and overwhelming majorities would be willing to join another citizen assembly on a different topic (92 per cent in British Columbia and 90 per cent in the Netherlands). In all three cases, these evaluative data indicate a very high degree of appreciation among the members for their assembly experience.
So how can we account for the motivation, interest, dedication, and enthusiasm exhibited by assembly members? While the attraction of ‘making history’ by being the first to participate in a citizen assembly was an obvious attraction and source of pride for many members, this account of the structure and process, along with our own observation of the proceedings, allows us to suggest some of the factors that might be critical to their high level of engagement:

* **Random selection**

Selected through a process based on randomness, albeit one that provided for the opportunity to self-select out, members developed a strong sense of legitimacy. The assemblies attracted members with high levels of motivation.

* **Important task**

Electoral systems have important consequences that echo through the entire political system. Assembly members knew they were charged with a policy problem that was central to the health of their democracy. This provided a relevant and motivating challenge with serious stakes.

* **Significant power**

Members perceived that the assemblies had real influence and power. They were not simply engaged in public relations or consultations. In British Columbia and Ontario, any recommendation for change would automatically go to public referendum. In the Netherlands, the *Burgerforum*’s report would be delivered directly to the nation’s cabinet.

* **Independence from government**

Freed from any government control or management, the citizen assemblies were confident that they were masters of their own proceedings and the solutions that would emerge from them. This encouraged purposeful participation.

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**Table 2.7 Enthusiasm of Assembly Members**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>British Columbia</th>
<th>The Netherlands</th>
<th>Ontario</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The work of the assembly is important (1–5)</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This session was well worth my time (1–5)</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking forward to the next session (1–5)</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regrets joining the citizen assembly (%)</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would join another citizen assembly (%)</td>
<td>91.9</td>
<td>90.4</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the first three items, we report averages for the entire process (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The last two items were measured in the post-assembly questionnaire.
Why Citizen Assemblies and How did they Work?

- Effective leadership

A strong independent chair, with no interest in the substantive issue, created cooperative working and social relationships among the members that allowed them to spend the extended periods of time necessary for the successive phases of the project.

- Community building

An extensive residential context provided ample opportunities to socialize, trade joyous and less happy stories about life, and understand each other’s perspectives. Assembly meetings actually became a crucible where new friendships were forged.\(^{10}\) These personal bonds mattered as well in sustaining interest.

2.9 WHAT HAPPENED AFTERWARDS?

All three citizen assemblies came to an end, after their deliberative phase, with the production of final reports outlining their activities and final decisions. In the two Canadian cases, they made recommendations for a major change in the electoral system, while the Dutch Burgerforum suggested only minor alterations. The next stage would involve implementation of the recommendations. In British Columbia and Ontario, as the respective governments had promised, the reports triggered a referendum at the time of the subsequent provincial general election. The acceptance threshold was exceptionally high, with Ontario following British Columbia’s precedent of a double standard (60 per cent support province-wide and a majority in 60 per cent of the constituencies). In neither case did the referendum question engage the public, which was more preoccupied with the issues of the election. Campaigning politicians in both provinces mostly ignored the question. Despite this lack of attention, the assembly’s proposal was endorsed by 58 per cent of the British Columbian electorate (and a majority in all but two electoral districts) in 2005. The government, returned with a smaller vote share, decided that the proposal deserved another chance and promised to rerun the referendum in 2009 at the time of the next general election. In this second instance where some public funding was provided to both sides, STV attracted much less support: only 39 per cent of voters (with a majority in seven districts). This result mirrors the outcome of the 2007 referendum in Ontario, when MMP garnered only 37 per cent

\(^{10}\) This is epitomized by the fact that more than half of British Columbia’s assembly members attended a conference in January 2009 to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the inaugural meeting. Many considered this a ‘family reunion which they could not miss for the world’. In Ontario, three reunions have ensured members stayed connected.
province-wide and obtained a majority in only five of the 107 electoral districts. Both provinces have no immediate plans to revisit the issue of electoral reform.

In the Netherlands, the Burgerforum’s recommendation – never destined for voters – also had a frosty reception. Initially, D66 had the political clout to put electoral reform on the agenda and to instigate a citizen assembly, even though no other party had a real appetite for electoral system change. However, the political landscape changed drastically while the assembly was working. During the proceedings, the coalition government fell, the D66 ministers (including Pechtold) left the government, and an election was called. When the assembly’s report was released, no government had yet been formed. One did emerge a few months later, but D66 was not part of it. Given the structure of partisan and coalition interests, there was no prospect for electoral reform in the Netherlands, even of the modest sort proposed by the Burgerforum.

While all three citizen assemblies unfolded without a major problem, all three reform proposals failed to be implemented. Why? We will tackle this question in Chapter 8.

2.10 CONCLUSION

Electoral reform is a subject that closely touches the interests of active politicians, and so it took a set of idiosyncratic circumstances – a succession of particularly dysfunctional electoral outcomes and the unformed democratic instincts of an opposition politician suddenly in office – to create a citizen assembly in which ordinary voters were given the power to design the electoral system. The precedent of British Columbia’s assembly meant that the model was available when Dutch and Ontario politicians were seeking for a mechanism to consider the issue.

Gibson’s careful plan for a four-stage multi-month process worked. It was neither quick nor cheap, but the result appears, at this initial stage of the analysis, successful. Having sketched the ways in which these three assemblies were organized and operated, we can now turn to a more detailed consideration of just who these citizens were as well as why they decided as they did. The balance of the book will be devoted to examining the nature of participation, the dynamics of preferences, the quality of decision-making, the impact of the exercise on citizenship, and the reactions of other political actors.
Who were the Participants?

In democracy everyone has the right to be represented, even the jerks.


In the construction of the three assemblies, there was a strong emphasis on the importance of their ‘representativeness’. All selection procedures used a random selection process to send initial invitations and then to pick members from among those individuals willing to participate. In each case, the purpose of adopting the random selection principle was to create an assembly membership that was as representative as possible of the wider society (see Section 2.4). For instance, the Terms of Reference of the first assembly mandated that the participants were ‘to be broadly representative of the adult population of British Columbia’. Elections BC, which maintained the provincial voters’ list, argued that random selection would provide ‘a reasonable cross-section of the population reflecting an appropriate mix of ethnicity, education and economic status’.

Notwithstanding the efforts to use random sampling in the various stages of the selection process, self-selection was also a central element: only those who expressed an interest could take part. Although the stratification of the initial sample (using region, gender, and, in some cases, age) avoided visible differences between population and sample, self-selection could have led to distortions of the ‘mirror image’ of the electorate that the assemblies were intended to be.

Critical questions are raised. Where does the idea of representativeness come from, and why was it important? How well did the assemblies represent the general public? Did self-selection undermine the process? What consequences can be attached to (not) having a representative body? In this chapter, we start answering these questions by briefly discussing the notion of representation by lot as compared with representation by election. We argue that representation by lot is by no means a new form of political representation and that it derives its representative character from other sources than elections. Subsequently, we outline the similarities and differences between the respective populations and the assemblies, as well as examine the potential consequences of any differences. We conclude this discussion by considering the extent to which the representative character of the assemblies was perceived by the members as a critical element legitimating their activity.
When Citizens Decide

3.1 CAN RANDOMLY SELECTED INDIVIDUALS REPRESENT OTHERS?

‘Representation has only been associated with the system of election (…) never with lot’ writes Bernard Manin in his study of the foundations of modern representative democracy (1997: 8). Despite the strong relationship Manin sees between representation and elections, the idea that other mechanisms can underpin representation is accepted by others. For example, Hanna Pitkin, in her account of descriptive representation, notes that various authors propose using representative sampling to select representatives (1967: 73–91). She points out that some scholars argue that random sampling is to be preferred to elections because it is more likely to produce a parliament that reflects the population of ordinary citizens. More recently, others have also argued for the use of lotteries for representative systems (McCormick 2006).

In practice, though, the use of lotteries in politics has always been limited. And the idea of full random sampling has never been particularly popular. For example, Manin shows that in Athens, which is often characterized as using lotteries to fill offices, the process was restricted to citizens who expressed interest in holding office (see Section 1.3). Also, inclusiveness in Athens, the extent to which people were allowed to participate, was limited to a small group (Smith and Wales 2000: 56). Only citizens were allowed to acquire a representative function. Children, women, slaves, foreigners, and their descendants were not.

In all three citizen assemblies, some groups were also excluded. People below the voting age were disqualified. In British Columbia and Ontario, elected representatives and some party officials were barred from membership. In the Netherlands, the rules disallowed members of the Electoral Committee, of the Ministry of the Interior, and of the national and European parliaments from taking part in the assembly, but members of local councils and party officials were not excluded. In each case, the main reason for barring these officials seems to have been to ensure the assembly’s independence from government. Recommendations were to reflect the views and preferences of the public, not the politicians who would compete under any proposed electoral system.

Recognizing that these restrictions compromised an absolute random selection, the more significant challenge to assembly representativeness was self-selection: the final membership draws were limited to people who demonstrated their willingness to join the citizen assembly. Perhaps only individuals who cared for

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2 This was to be consistent with electoral laws which exclude members of the population on grounds such as age and citizenship.
the topic or had an axe to grind threw their name into the hat. We need to ask if self-selection distorted the representativeness of the assemblies.

How are we to evaluate representation through self-selection and lot as compared with representation through elections? One way is by focusing on different aspects of representation and using them to compare representation by lot with representation by election. Following previous work, we distinguish five types:

- **authorization**: individuals have the right to represent others through some accepted procedure;
- **responsibility**: individuals represent others by being obliged to explain some decisions and by accepting possible sanctions;
- **symbolization**: individuals are accepted as representative of others;
- **description**: individuals are representative by being like (in some respects) the others represented; and
- **substantive**: individuals represent others by acting according to their wishes and/or interests.

A democratically elected legislature is deemed representative mainly because it is *authorized* to act as a consequence of its members being selected by clearly defined electoral procedures. It is also representative because citizens are able to hold the assembly members *responsible* in subsequent elections. Some legislatures acquire a certain *symbolic* representation, although many parliaments face low levels of confidence and trust. Ideally, there is also some similarity between the legislative assembly and the public, although full *descriptive* representation is generally neither attained nor desired. It is not attained because assemblies and populations often differ substantially – many legislatures have disproportionately few women or members of minority groups. It is seldom desired, for parliaments are also expected to be wiser and more informed than the electorate at large. However, in some instances, even the central elements of a legislature’s representative character – authorization and responsibility – can be relatively deficient. Warren argues that ‘democratic linkages between citizens and representatives can and do break down in numerous ways’ and people ‘are increasingly likely to believe that representative linkages are not working well’ (2008: 52–3). Electoral procedures and results are occasionally contested, and the capacity to hold officials accountable is questionable. In sum, elections are often rather blunt instruments of democratic control.

Citizen assemblies appear to provide an alternative to the deficiencies in the representativeness of elected bodies by focusing on other aspects of representation. The representative character of citizen assemblies is mainly built upon the

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3 The prime source for a discussion of the various aspects of representation is Pitkin (1967). Brown (2006) argues that different representative bodies can stress different aspects of representation. Others too have studied which aspects of representation are relevant for different representative bodies (Mansbridge 2003; James 2008: 121–6; Warren 2008: 67–8).
concepts of *descriptive* and *substantive* representation. The descriptive part is obvious: the selection process is designed to produce an assembly that reflects the society from which it is drawn. As a consequence, the assembly is expected to have preferences that are more congruent with those of the general population than those of elected politicians. Therefore, assembly designers expected that assemblies would also be better able to substantively represent the population. Descriptive and substantive representation, along with *authorization* through lottery and self-selection, would also legitimize an assembly through *symbolic* representation. In the citizen assemblies, the final aspect of representation – *responsibility* – was less important. Though one might argue that the assemblies as a whole were also held accountable, for in two cases their decisions were subject to popular referendum, while in the third case the advice was delivered to government for evaluation by elected representatives.\(^4\)

The citizen assemblies were thus designed to represent the population, albeit in a different way than legislatures do. Descriptive representation was to increase both their substantive and symbolic representational dimensions. At the same time, however, the assemblies were intended as deliberative bodies whose participants would be open to reconsider and change their opinions, a premise that seems to run contrary to the idea of pure descriptive representation. Our question is to what extent the three citizen assemblies actually met the criteria of descriptive representation.

### 3.2 COMPARING ASSEMBLIES AND POPULATIONS

The selection of members in the three assemblies started with random sampling from lists of voters. All drawn individuals were sent a letter asking them to participate in the process. Among each of the different communities, the same proportion – about 6–7 per cent – responded positively indicating an interest in participating (see Table 2.1). In all three selection processes, the intention was to choose equal numbers of men and women. And in each case, geographical representation – constituencies in British Columbia and Ontario, provinces in the Netherlands – was fully assured by using those units as strata in the sampling procedure. In addition, in British Columbia, explicit attention was paid to the representation of age groups.\(^5\) All other characteristics were largely left to random selection.

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\(^4\) Pitkin sees an inherent tension between description and accountability; people cannot be held accountable for what they are.

\(^5\) In Ontario, the initial sample was also stratified by age, but this criterion was not used in the subsequent steps that led to the selection of members.
Who were the Participants?

The comparisons in this chapter use data from statistical offices and election studies to describe the populations. For the assemblies, we rely on the first survey conducted among the participants. Comparing three assemblies with three populations is far from simple. Not all data sets were designed to be comparable. Some information from the election studies was only collected among a subset of the initial sample, making inferences to the population at large difficult. In some instances, the evidence only allows us to make comparisons for one or two assemblies. The data, therefore, have to be interpreted with care.

3.3 WERE THE ASSEMBLIES REPRESENTATIVE IN TERMS OF SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS?

Given that the sampling process that underlay assembly invitations was strongly organized around gender and geographical representation, it is not surprising that men and women were represented equally and that all geographical units were well represented. The effort to represent all age groups, however, was a little less successful. The two cases where age sampling was less strictly applied (the Netherlands and Ontario) produced assemblies that better reflected the population’s age distribution (Table 3.1). In British Columbia, both the youngest and the oldest age groups were under-represented. In the Netherlands, only the oldest age group was

| Table 3.1 Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Population and the Participants |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                 | British Columbia | The Netherlands | Ontario         |
| 18–24           | 11   | 7    | 11   | 11   | 12   | 11   |
| 25–39           | 26   | 24   | 26   | 32   | 27   | 23   |
| 40–55           | 32   | 35   | 30   | 31   | 30   | 32   |
| 56–70           | 17   | 28   | 21   | 23   | 20   | 26   |
| 71+             | 14   | 6    | 13   | 4    | 11   | 12   |
| Country of origin |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Canada          | 73   | 74   | —    | —    | 71   | 74   |
| Other           | 27   | 26   | —    | —    | 29   | 26   |
| Education       |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| No high school degree | 28 | 5 | 9 | 1 | 22 | 2 |
| Bachelor/university | 19 | 44 | 26 | 57 | 20 | 44 |
| Average no. of organizational memberships | 2.0 | 2.1 | — | — | 1.8 | 1.8 |

Apart from the last row, numbers are percentages.
under-represented; about 13 per cent of the Dutch population is older than 70, while only 4 per cent in the assembly belonged to this age group. By comparison, Ontario’s assembly replicated the age distribution of its population quite well. The number of people born abroad – about a quarter of the Canadian voting-age population – was almost completely matched in the two Canadian assemblies.\(^6\)

When studying descriptive representation, one has to decide which characteristics of individuals are relevant. One approach is to concentrate on socio-demographic variables known to be related to political participation. Research indicates that age and education are two central determinants of participation (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Blais 2000; Franklin 2004). Individuals participate because they can, because they want to, and because they have been asked to (Verba et al. 1995). Since these factors are so predominant among older, better-educated, and more socially connected people, participants are more likely to come from these groups. We have already indicated that the population’s age breakdown was reproduced relatively accurately in the assemblies. What about the other two factors?

Were assembly members more educated than the populations they came from? University training provides the simplest comparative measure of education across the assemblies and populations.\(^7\) On average, members of the assembly were far more educated than the general population (see Table 3.1). Across British Columbia, the percentage of people with a university degree was 19 per cent, among assembly members it was more than twice that at 44 per cent. In Ontario, the figures were similar: 20 per cent (population) as compared with 44 per cent (assembly). In the Netherlands, which has a different type of educational system, 26 per cent of the population was trained at this level, while the number was over twice as large in the Burgerforum (57 per cent). And the proportions of individuals without a high school degree were dramatically lower in all assemblies than among the wider populations.

Did assembly members exhibit more social capital? No. Their average number of memberships in civic organizations – an indicator of the extent of social network integration – is almost identical to the population data.

In terms of socio-demographic profiles, it appears that the main discrepancy between the assemblies and the populations concerned education levels: assembly participants were much better educated. This difference is also uncovered in deliberative polls, the process that makes the most strenuous efforts to attain strict

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\(^6\) The population figures are drawn from census statistics: 2001 for British Columbia and 2006 for Ontario.

\(^7\) To measure the level of education in the Canadian population, we use census data for the population over 15 years old (from Statistics Canada). The Dutch population data were collected from Statistics Netherlands and cover individuals aged between 15 and 64 (thus including people not having finished their studies yet and excluding a large part of the older population). The appropriate categories that amount to university graduates were collapsed in the British Columbia and Ontario assembly questionnaires. The equivalent Dutch assembly categories include ‘HBO’ and university. In the table, we also find comparisons across the lowest level of education. The lowest level in Canada is no high school diploma, while in the Netherlands, it is having only ‘basisschool’.
representativeness. While the participants of deliberative polls generally resemble those contacted but who did not participate, both groups tend to be more educated than the general population (see Fishkin et al. 2009, App. A1; Farrar et al. 2010, App. A). This difference, however, need not be problematic if the attitudes of participants are similar to those of the general public. We thus examine whether this was true or not in the case of the three citizen assemblies.

### 3.4 WERE THE ASSEMBLIES REPRESENTATIVE IN TERMS OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS POLITICS?

In this section, we compare the political views and behaviours of assembly members, as expressed in the first baseline questionnaire, with those of a representative sample of the population as revealed in the nearest national election study. This is the 2004 Canadian Election Study for British Columbia, the 2006 Canadian Election Study for Ontario, and the 2006 Dutch Parliamentary Election Study for the Netherlands. We start by

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**TABLE 3.2 General Attitudes and Behaviours of the Population and the Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>British Columbia</th>
<th>The Netherlands</th>
<th>Ontario</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political interest</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (0–2)</td>
<td>19 1 16 8</td>
<td>14 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium-low (3–5)</td>
<td>30 24 33 31</td>
<td>30 14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium-high (6–8)</td>
<td>33 50 23 40</td>
<td>40 59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (9–10)</td>
<td>18 25 28 21</td>
<td>15 24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Satisfaction with democracy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very satisfied</td>
<td>12 1 7 8</td>
<td>16 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly satisfied</td>
<td>42 46 69 70</td>
<td>49 67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very satisfied</td>
<td>30 46 20 19</td>
<td>24 21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not satisfied at all</td>
<td>13 7 4 2</td>
<td>7 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Government does not care</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>24 11 — 15</td>
<td>22 11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat agree</td>
<td>37 40 44 47</td>
<td>38 31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat disagree</td>
<td>27 35 56 35</td>
<td>28 40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>11 13 — 3</td>
<td>10 16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Turnout</strong></td>
<td>71 95 80 98</td>
<td>57 96</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Numbers are percentages.
looking at general attitudes towards politics. If citizens are interested in politics, we would expect that they would be more willing to participate. Were assembly members more politically interested than the average person? Not surprisingly, they were (see Table 3.2).\(^9\) Very few assembly members indicated little or no interest in politics, while between 15 and 20 per cent of the populations admitted as much. At the other end of the scale, the assemblies contained a larger proportion of highly interested individuals than the population in two of the three cases.\(^10\)

Perhaps more directly relevant are attitudes towards politicians and the government, for they may shape preferences regarding electoral systems. Two competing expectations can be formulated. The first is that assembly members have a more positive outlook towards politics than the general public, given that they are more politically interested and there is a connection between interest and positive attitudes. But alternatively, it may be that members are more negative than the population, for they may have been predominantly (self-) selected from among the ranks of those who think politics can and should be improved. If both factors are at work, they may even cancel each other out.

The results of our analysis are ambiguous.\(^11\) On the one hand, in the two Canadian assemblies, sentiments towards the state of democracy were slightly more negative than among the public at large: members claimed to be a bit less satisfied with the way democracy currently works. In the Netherlands, though, there was no substantial difference between the two groups.\(^12\) On the other hand, traditional indicators of cynicism and efficacy exhibited the reverse pattern. Canadian assembly members reported more positive attitudes about government and politicians than the general public, while \textit{Burgerforum} participants held more negative views than the population. Statements like ‘the government does not care about what people like me think’, ‘those elected soon lose touch with the people’, ‘all parties are basically the same’, and ‘politicians are ready to lie to get elected’ were supported less frequently by the British Columbia and Ontario assembly members than by their fellow citizens. For their part, Dutch assembly members were more likely than their compatriots to think that ‘people like me have no influence on government policy’, that ‘MPs do not care about the opinions of people’, and that ‘political parties are only interested in votes not opinions’.

\(^9\) Instead of political interest, we used a slightly different question in the Dutch case in order to facilitate comparison with the Dutch population: ‘When there is national news in the newspaper, for example about problems in the government, how often do you read it?’.\(^10\) Overall, on a 0–10 scale, the assemblies and populations differed by an average of 1.5 points.\(^11\) Note that the population data were not collected at the same time as the assembly data, and the observed differences could be a consequence of changes in context.\(^12\) In the Canadian assembly questionnaires, this question was positioned right before the ‘satisfaction with the electoral system’ item, so this result may have been a consequence of the close proximity of the latter.
Finally, we inspected two central political behaviours: turnout and vote choice. Almost all assembly members reported having voted in the previous election (95 per cent or more). Of official turnout statistics suggest that 20–43 per cent of citizens failed to show up at the ballot box. So it seems clear that those abstainers also shied away from the assembly process. In addition, the partisan preferences of assembly members differed from those of the entire electorate. We compared the distribution of reported party support in the most recent election among assembly members with the actual election results. In British Columbia, the absolute differences added up to just 6 percentage points. But at 23 and 17 points, the totals were higher in the Netherlands and Ontario. However, there does not seem to be a clear pattern to these deviations, for in both British Columbia and the Netherlands the largest parties were under-represented, while the governing party was over-represented in Ontario. These data reveal that there were notable differences between the political attitudes of the populations and those of the assemblies. With the exception of greater levels of interest and turnout among the assembly memberships, though, the direction of these differences varied across the three cases.

\[13\] Since turnout is likely over-reported in a survey, the real difference with actual turnout may have been smaller.

\[14\] These are the summed absolute differences between percentages in the assembly voting for a party and actual support in the last election according to voting records divided by 2.
3.5 WERE THE ASSEMBLIES REPRESENTATIVE IN TERMS OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS ELECTORAL SYSTEMS?

Given their mandates, the most important potential biases in these assemblies are to be sought in their members’ attitudes towards electoral systems. Such bias could have directly influenced the outcome of the process. The simplest attitude to examine is satisfaction with the current electoral system. In all three assemblies, members were less satisfied with their existing system than the population (see Table 3.3). The differences were considerable. In British Columbia, where a clear majority of the population was content with ‘first-past-the-post’ (58 per cent), most assembly participants expressed dissatisfaction (64 per cent). In the other two cases, both groups were on the happier side of the fence, but the assembly majorities were slimmer. Only 13 per cent of the Dutch population was dissatisfied with open-list proportional representation (list-PR), while 30 per cent of Burger-forum members shared that opinion. In Ontario, three-quarters of the public was pleased with the status quo, compared with only about half of the assembly members. This suggests that assembly participants may have been more inclined towards electoral reform than were average citizens.

Although the populations were generally satisfied, the Canadians did not like some of the features of their electoral system. Most British Columbians (62 per cent) and Ontarians (56 per cent) thought it was unacceptable for a party to ‘win a majority of seats without winning a majority of votes’ (an inherent feature of single member plurality). Among the assemblies, this sentiment was even more widespread (76 and 73 per cent respectively). Both groups also agreed with the general principle of proportionality. The public in British Columbia (48 per cent) and Ontario (47 per cent) believed that ‘a party that gets 10 per cent of the votes should also get 10 per cent of the seats’, and even larger proportions of assembly members subscribed to the proposition (70 and 65 per cent). Despite being satisfied with the current electoral system, many Canadians, both inside and outside the assemblies, desired a system that would generate more proportional electoral outcomes.

In the 2006 Dutch Parliamentary Election Study, respondents were only asked about the desirability of a more regionally based system. Less than half the population said that regional differences were not sufficiently reflected in parliamentary elections (43 per cent). As the Dutch assembly process started, a majority of its participants supported the idea that better representation of regions in parliament was needed (67 per cent). This gap between the two groups proved

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15 The question was about the Canadian system in the population survey. Since provincial and national electoral systems are comparable, we can safely assume the attitudes will be similar. The question in the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study was ‘How satisfied are you with the way members of Parliament are currently elected?’. Dutch members were asked: ‘How satisfied are you with the functioning of the current electoral system?’.
to be inconsequential, since support for a district-based electoral system was not strong enough to advance such a proposal to the decision-making phase.

In sum, there seems to have been a bias in favour of change in all three citizen assemblies. Assembly members were less satisfied with the existing electoral system than their respective populations. But higher levels of public satisfaction were tempered by dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the electoral system. Moreover, especially in the two Canadian cases, assembly members and the general population favoured changes in the same direction.

3.6 DID THE BIASES MATTER?

Compared with the populations, citizen assembly members were better educated, more interested in politics, and less satisfied with the current electoral system in all three cases. These biases may have had consequences for substantive representation if these characteristics were also related to opinions about the most desirable electoral system.

Since it was impossible to ask for the participants’ views about systems they had never heard of, we only started capturing their preferences at the conclusion of the learning phase. We use this first measurement, recognizing the possibility that members’ initial preferences may have already been changed by this time. To analyse the relationship between members’ characteristics and electoral system preferences, we focus on comparisons between the four electoral systems that received the most attention in the assemblies: single member plurality (SMP), single transferable vote (STV), mixed member proportional (MMP), and list-PR.

Did participants with a higher level of education, a higher level of political interest, and a less positive attitude towards the current voting system have substantially different opinions about electoral systems? And more specifically, did they have stronger preferences for a particular system that is a departure from the status quo? Table 3.4 presents the bivariate relationships between these three variables and relative evaluations of electoral systems.

In British Columbia, education and satisfaction with the current system were negatively correlated to the relative preference of SMP (the status quo) to STV (the ultimate reform proposal). However, it should be noted that even among those having low levels of education, STV was preferred to SMP. The effect of a more representative assembly would thus have been small. In addition, there seems to have been a relationship between education and a preference for STV relative to both MMP and list-PR. The background of this difference is still unclear. In Chapter 5, we will see that assembly members who favoured a simple system resisted STV. It may be that these individuals were less educated, a proposition we explore in Chapter 6.
In the Netherlands, education – the most important difference found between the population and the assembly – was not related to system preferences. Nor were more subtle divergences between different variants of list proportional representation (open, closed, or free) linked to education. In Ontario, a relative preference for proportional electoral systems over the status quo was somewhat more visible among the higher educated participants, for education was connected to higher rankings of both list-PR and MMP than SMP. Still, this variable did not point to one particular favourite system.

So, apart from British Columbia where those with a higher level of education liked STV more than MMP from the start while those less educated had the reverse ranking, the representational deficiencies we observe in the assemblies were not substantially associated with differences of opinion regarding the various electoral system families considered.

### 3.7 HOW DID THE ASSEMBLIES PERCEIVE THEIR COMPOSITION?

This brings us to a final observation about how the question of randomness and representativeness was seen by the participants. Assembly designers intended that

| Table 3.4 Relationships between Variables and Initial Preferences for Electoral Systems |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
|                                | SMP > STV | SMP > MMP | SMP > list-PR | STV > MMP | STV > list-PR |
| **British Columbia**          |            |            |                |            |                |
| Education                      | −0.14*     | n.s.       | n.s.           | 0.22**     | 0.19**         |
| Political interest             | n.s.       | n.s.       | n.s.           | n.s.       | n.s.           |
| System satisfaction            | −0.16*     | n.s.       | −0.24**        | n.s.       | −0.14**        |
| **Netherlands**               |            |            |                |            |                |
| Education                      | n.s.       | n.s.       | n.s.           | n.s.       | n.s.           |
| Political interest             | n.s.       | n.s.       | −0.12*         | 0.16**     | n.s.           |
| System satisfaction            | n.s.       | n.s.       | n.s.           | n.s.       | 0.17**         |
| **Ontario**                   |            |            |                |            |                |
| Education                      | n.s.       | −0.19*     | −0.26**        | n.s.       | n.s.           |
| Political interest             | n.s.       | n.s.       | n.s.           | n.s.       | n.s.           |
| System satisfaction            | −0.20**    | n.s.       | n.s.           | n.s.       | n.s.           |

** Significant at 0.05; * significant at 0.10. Numbers are Kendall tau-b. The data are based on rankings (B preferred to A, indifferent, or A preferred to B).
these groups would derive their legitimacy from a random selection process that
would produce an assembly of ordinary citizens. To what extent was this true?

The members of the first assembly, in British Columbia, accepted the claim that
they were representative because of random selection. Though some initially
wondered if they were individually representative of their area as opposed to
being collectively representative of the province, most ultimately opted for the
latter position. They also adopted randomness as the acceptable basis for action.
Thus, when it was decided, on a couple of occasions, to appoint a committee – to
choose the presentations to be heard on the first day of the deliberative phase, or to
select the members who would present the final report to the government – all
agreed that the right way to select the committee was by random draw. Random-
ness was considered very important by the members and it legitimated their
capacity to speak for the people of British Columbia.

Within the Dutch assembly, there were some discussions about whether the
Burgerforum was indeed able to ‘stand for and act for’ the Dutch population.
Some members saw themselves as mere delegates and suggested the assembly
should conduct a study among the people to find out what they wanted. However,
the chair stressed the idea that the assembly should act ‘on behalf of’ the public,
and this was ultimately accepted by the membership. In the work of the Burger-
forum, the idea of randomness was not an operating principle, and committee
construction mostly depended on a self-selection mechanism.

In Ontario, the representative character of the assembly became an important
identifying characteristic, largely because the chair would often repeat the claim to
both the members and the media. The members probably hoped that, as a
representative sample of the public, their recommendations would have traction.
The phrase ‘random selection of Ontarians’ or an equivalent was occasionally
mentioned in the media, but neither to support nor impugn their recommendations.

The extent to which the representativeness of the assemblies had consequences
in the Canadian referendums on their recommendations is discussed in Chapter 8.

### 3.8 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have shown that, despite the emphasis on randomness and
despite a careful reflection of gender, region, and, to some extent, age, there were
some differences between the populations and the citizen assemblies. In all three
cases, assembly members were more educated than the voting-age population
from which they were drawn. Education, however, was not significantly and
systematically linked to preferences concerning electoral systems. There were
also gaps between the assemblies and their respective populations on certain
political attitudes. Members expressed greater interest in politics and less
satisfaction for the current voting system. Nevertheless, ratings of major electoral system families did not differ substantially in consistent ways across levels of interest and satisfaction.

There is an issue about whether these attitudinal discrepancies between the assemblies and the populations stem from the inherent limitations of the selection process or from some natural evolutionary process. On the one hand, it is entirely possible that the random draw among a self-selected pool resulted in a group of individuals who were different – more interested and more reform-oriented – than typical citizens. When recruiting individuals to spend a year working on a public policy proposal, it seems unrealistic to expect to attract a perfectly representative group. On the other hand, these biases could have been the consequences of the preliminary deliberative activity of newly identified members. Our baseline survey was administered before the formal work of the citizen assembly had begun, but quite some time after the participants were first selected – approximately two months in the Canadian cases, and about two weeks in the Netherlands. It is possible that the views of individual members evolved during this period. Perhaps people who have committed to extensive public work on a particular topic start to think about that subject, to do some research on their own, and to bring up that topic when chatting with acquaintances. During these many weeks, interest in politics might have been enhanced and attitudes towards electoral politics might have been nudged in the direction of change. This possibility might help explain why attitudinal gaps between population and assembly for political interest and satisfaction with the current system were smallest in the Netherlands where the period between the selection and our baseline questionnaire was shortest. We simply cannot rule out one hypothesis over the other. Reality is probably a mixture of both.

The logic and the legitimacy of the citizen assemblies depended on them being representative. It is clear that, at least on some dimensions, they were not. Nevertheless, had these departures from perfect representativeness not existed, had the composition of the assemblies perfectly mirrored the populations, there is no persuasive evidence that the outcomes of the citizen assemblies would have been any different. In Chapter 4, we examine the dynamics that led to their final decisions.
How did the Decisions Come About?

The decisions affecting matters of general interest come to by an assembly of men of distinction, but specialists in different walks of life, are not sensibly superior to the decisions that would be adopted by a gathering of imbeciles. The truth is, they can only bring to bear in common on the work in hand those mediocre qualities which are the birthright of every average individual.

Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd* (1896)

As we have seen in previous chapters, three structurally similar citizen assemblies on electoral reform came to three different conclusions. In two cases – British Columbia and Ontario – they recommended a major change. Although the two Canadian assemblies both decided that their single member plurality (SMP) system ought to give way to a form of proportional representation (PR), they clearly differed on what sort of PR system was desirable. For its part, the Dutch *Burgerforum* called for a modest change to the ballot, but essentially recommended the Netherlands maintain its existing system. This would seem to refute critics’ claim that if citizens are put to work for an extended period they will inevitably recommend some major change, if only to justify their time and effort. In this chapter, we trace the dynamics of assembly members’ preferences throughout the proceedings to explore how they came to such different outcomes.

During a year-long deliberative process, opinion stability is unlikely, and one should expect some inter-temporal dynamics. But different types of instability are possible. On the one hand, there is evidence of extreme individual attitude change: citizens’ views about political issues often fluctuate over time, almost to the point of appearing like random responses (Converse 1964; Feldman 1989; Zaller and Feldman 1992). On the other hand, the literature on deliberative democracy – both empirical and theoretical – clearly argues that learning, discussion, and thought engender more enlightened preferences (cf. Luskin et al. 2002; Mutz 2002, 2006).

As the embodiment of ‘deliberation-on-steroids’, citizen assemblies should be more likely to exhibit the second type of movement. The extensive knowledge-acquisition and decision-making phases of our three cases ought to have led to progressive and systematic – rather than flimsy and haphazard – opinion change. Is this expectation valid?
This chapter documents the path taken by assembly members’ views on electoral systems. It ascertains when preferences emerged, whether they moved afterwards, how volatile they were, and whether the movement was steered by comprehensible factors.

4.1 THE STARTING POINT

In each assembly, the existing electoral system inevitably provided members with a benchmark. It was the system with which they were most familiar, and the one against which any recommendation would have to be measured. One might expect that an impact of the assembly’s learning phase would be some alteration in members’ attitudes about their own system as they gained knowledge about the wide variety, and comparative merits, of alternative ways of conducting elections. This proved to be the case in two of the assemblies. In both British Columbia and Ontario, the two instances of plurality systems, the proportion expressing satisfaction ‘with the way the electoral system works in [their province]’ was never particularly high to begin with, but it dropped sharply over the course of the learning stage. In British Columbia, it was halved, from 35 to just 19 per cent, while in Ontario the proportion satisfied fell from 54 to 33 per cent. It would seem that the more Canadian participants learned, the less satisfactory their own system appeared to them. By contrast, the Dutch members went into their assembly far happier, 70 per cent were fairly or very satisfied with their electoral system, and learning about other systems led to even more of them expressing satisfaction (82 per cent).

Interestingly, the more frequent tracking of members’ opinions in British Columbia indicates that most of the decline in satisfaction with the province’s current system had occurred by the second weekend of the learning phase, before other electoral systems had been examined. The earliness of this shift suggests that more knowledge about the status quo was the key explanation, rather than in-depth information about the various other options.

At the beginning of the assembly process, in a questionnaire administered before the first meeting, we could not enquire about participants’ opinions on the variety of electoral systems, simply because they lacked knowledge of the multiple alternatives. But we did ask them if they preferred one electoral system for their jurisdiction (province/country). The vast majority of assembly members

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1 Interestingly, this Canadian decline in expressed satisfaction with the working of domestic electoral systems was not matched by a similar decline in satisfaction with the state of (domestic) democracy. That said, the Dutch consistently expressed higher levels of satisfaction with their democracy than did the Ontario members who, in turn, were more satisfied than the British Columbians.
claimed that they had no preferred system in mind: 90 per cent in both British Columbia and Ontario, and 83 per cent in the Netherlands.

The learning phase changed this initial state of affairs. By its end, the proportions reporting no preference had dropped to slightly less than half (47 per cent in British Columbia, 46 per cent in the Netherlands, and 44 per cent in Ontario). How quickly did the preferences emerge during the information-acquisition sessions? The more detailed British Columbia data provide some indication. The percentage with a favourite system increased from 10 per cent before the proceedings, to 25 per cent in the third (of six) learning weekends, to 39 per cent in the fourth, to 53 per cent after the public consultations. Thus, the opinions were forged gradually over the many weeks of the first part of the process.

The preferences that had begun to materialize reveal that the assemblies were starting to move in different directions. Among the Dutch, already highly disposed to favour their existing system, no other system commanded substantial support. In both Canadian provinces, the members who had developed a preference through the learning phase were not rallying to their current plurality systems. In Ontario, a very large majority (about 80 per cent) of the decided claimed to support a mixed member proportional (MMP) system, suggesting that an incipient consensus had become apparent by the end of this phase. In British Columbia, the half of the assembly’s membership which had developed a preference was divided between those favouring the single transferable vote (STV) and those opting for an MMP system.

At the end of the learning phase, the assemblies had successfully accomplished one of their major tasks – teaching their members enough about electoral systems so that they could make assessments about them and begin to deliberate in a thoughtful and informed way about possible alternatives. As we have seen, this process appears to have left the members of the two Canadian assemblies more unsatisfied with their existing systems and so predisposed to seek an alternative. Dutch members exhibited the reverse pattern, they seem to have learned little that reduced their confidence in the country’s current system or fostered a debate that was likely to lead to any major change.

4.2 CHANGING VIEWS OF ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

After the learning phase, members knew enough about the distinctive elements of a range of different electoral systems, and how they incorporated various representational principles, to come to initial judgements about them. Table 4.1 records their estimations of ‘how good’ members thought ‘each system would be’ for their community. The evaluations ranged from ‘very bad’ to ‘very good’ (on a 1–7 scale), and were captured at three critical junctures in the assembly process: at the
end of the learning phase, at the midpoint (after the consultation phase), and after the completion of the final recommendation and report.

Assembly members were obviously able and willing to discriminate among electoral systems. The ratings they gave used much of the available scale and a number of systems – primarily the majoritarian and plurality types – regularly got what might be considered failing grades in the bottom half of the range. Indeed, their ratings suggest that most of the Canadians consistently thought almost any other (proportional) system was better than their existing SMP regime. The Dutch agreed.

The data also suggest that assembly members became, if anything, more discriminating over the life of the process, as the range of scores given to the various types of systems (i.e. the difference between the highest and lowest ratings) steadily increased, growing from the learning phase through the following stages and reaching a maximum at the end of the assemblies’ work.

There were, however, some important differences between the assemblies. Dutch and Ontario assembly members appear to have travelled a similar path. Three features characterize the evolution of assessments of electoral systems among these two assemblies. First, the system that got the largest average rating at the end of the learning phase continued to be rated highest in subsequent evaluations later in the process. Second, the average score given to their most highly rated system grew at each successive stage. And third, the strength of their preference for this system (as measured by the difference between its score and the score of the second best rated system) also grew in each following survey. To put it simply, assembly members in the Netherlands and Ontario seem to have settled on a view that identified the best system by the end of the learning phase, and then just consolidated and strengthened that preference over the consultation and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.1 Average Ratings of Electoral Systems</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>British Columbia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority, two ballots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority, preferential ballot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plurality, single member (SMP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plurality, multi-member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportional representation, open-list</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportional representation, closed-list</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single transferable vote (STV)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed, proportional (MMP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed, parallel (MMM)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scores on 1–7 scales: very bad to very good. Three points in time: T1 is the end of the learning phase, T2 is the midpoint, and T3 is after the final decision.
deliberation phases. In the Netherlands, this meant that debate quickly focused around suggestions for modest change (open-list PR). In Ontario, the emergence of widespread support for MMP essentially transformed the deliberative phase into a design exercise exploring this system’s different variables.

The assembly in British Columbia had a quite different experience. Not one of the three conditions that characterized the evolution of system ratings in the other two assemblies marks its pattern. There was no steady growth in the ratings members gave to highly rated systems, nor was there any systematic consolidation of apparent preferences. Most significantly, the system with the highest initial average rating (MMP) was not the one most preferred at the end. Instead, the deliberative phase witnessed a major change in the order of system rankings and saw the emergence of the STV as the assembly’s most highly rated electoral system.

To help focus on the choices assembly members made, we can isolate the key alternatives each ultimately dealt with in their deliberative phase. In the Dutch case, it was staying with a form of open-list PR or shifting to an MMP system that would provide some greater degree of local representation. In the two Canadian cases, it was a choice between which of the two proportional alternatives, MMP or STV, would be recommended. The charts in Figure 4.1 record the proportions of members who rated one of these two alternatives higher than the other, or indicated that they were indifferent between them. They illustrate that there were striking differences in the evolution of these assemblies’ evaluations of competing systems.

Ontario assembly members’ relative rankings appear to have been unmistakable from the beginning. A substantial majority gave the mixed member alternative...
their highest rating as early as the end of the learning phase (69 per cent), and that number only grew as the comparatively small proportions of those with no preference (19 per cent) and those who preferred STV (12 per cent) shrank. It is difficult to see in this profile much evidence that the deliberative phase did anything but rally the minority to the inevitable final decision.

**Figure 4.1** Evolution of Members’ System Rankings
How did the Decisions Come About?

The Dutch chart indicates that there were twice as many members as in Ontario who were still indifferent at the early stages of the process (38 per cent). However, as time went on, many of those individuals appear to have recognized the country’s basic satisfaction with its existing commitment to a highly national form of proportionality. Similarly, the initial modest support for MMP (21 per cent) dropped decisively during the deliberations. By the end of the proceedings, open-list PR was far and away the most highly rated system of a large majority of the membership.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the deliberative phase was not critical in either of these two assemblies – the main decision had effectively been made before the members got to this stage. Deliberations simply reinforced existing preferences. Of course, aggregate relative stability could be masking massive individual volatility. But that was not the case. In both the Netherlands and Ontario, majorities of assembly members gave electoral systems very similar evaluations over time. For instance, 77 per cent of Burgerforum participants gave open-list PR essentially the same score after the learning phase and at the end of the process. Similarly, 82 per cent of Ontarians provided MMP ratings which did not change over the many months between T1 and T3.2

The British Columbia chart suggests that its membership went through a more complex transformation during its deliberative phase. It appears that at the end of the learning phase, twice as many members rated MMP higher than STV (41 per cent as opposed to 20 per cent), while about 40 per cent rated them equally. Although the numbers expressing no preference between the two slowly declined, the proportion ranking STV first did not exceed those giving the highest rating to MMP until the deliberation phase during which it grew dramatically. When did STV surpass MMP? At the end of the second deliberative weekend, after an STV model was designed for British Columbia, assembly members were asked to rank order five electoral systems. For the first time, STV was ranked higher than MMP, and by a ratio of 2:1 (66 per cent versus 31 per cent). The design of an MMP model the following weekend did not reverse this pattern, and ultimately the assembly decided to recommend an STV electoral system.

This account reveals what the assembly members were thinking about different electoral systems and how that changed (or not) as they worked through the successive stages of their process. It does not tell us why they were making those judgements or the balance of considerations that led to them (we explore these questions in Chapter 5). But there is a puzzle to explain. Why was there, in the British Columbia assembly, a drastic shift in the assessments of the two proportional alternative systems that produced the final proposal of STV? Our first candidate is the dynamics of the importance that members attached to a series of principles relating to the features and consequences of electoral systems.

2 We count scores as the same if respondents gave a rating that was identical or that differed by only one point.
Citizens who knew little about the workings of different electoral systems were unlikely to evaluate them in any narrow technical or legalistic way. They started with a focus on the values they believed an acceptable electoral regime ought to articulate as basis from which to compare and assess alternatives. There are many criteria by which electoral systems are conventionally judged by political scientists, politicians, and activists, and assembly members were seemingly prepared to consider them all. Table 4.2 reports their assessments of the importance of a set of different criteria from the end of the learning phase to the completion of their work. Assembly members were not systematically asked to choose among the criteria or to rank order them, but they were invited to rate each separately on a seven-point scale where ‘1’ represents the opinion that the criteria was ‘not important’ and ‘7’ that it was considered ‘extremely important’. We can draw several observations from this evidence: most values were rated highly; there was little change in the importance members attributed to them; and the lack of temporal dynamics implies they cannot explain the shift in system preferences in British Columbia.

First, even after a long and arduous learning and deliberative process, these citizens were genuinely reluctant to rate any of these criteria as unimportant. The average ratings are very high, with little differentiation among them. Over time, the difference between the highest- and lowest rated criteria actually shrank in both the change-oriented British Columbia and Ontario assemblies. In none of the assemblies did any single criteria ever fall into the lower half of the scale. It is also difficult to identify any criteria as obviously trumping others, despite the fact that all electoral systems involve quite explicit trade-offs among these very values and

| Table 4.2 Average Importance Assessments of Criteria for Judging Electoral Systems |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                                 | British Columbia | The Netherlands | Ontario         |                 |                 |                 |                 |                 |
|                                 | T1   | T2   | T3   | T1   | T2   | T3   | T1   | T2   | T3   |
| Effective government           | 6.1  | 5.8  | 6.1  | 6.2  | 6.0  | 6.1  | 5.9  | 5.8  | 6.2  |
| Electoral accountability       | 5.8  | 5.9  | 6.0  | 6.3  | 6.1  | 6.1  | 5.8  | 5.7  | 6.0  |
| Parliamentary check on government | 6.0  | 5.8  | 6.0  | 6.3  | 6.2  | 6.2  | 5.9  | 5.7  | 6.1  |
| Fair representation of parties/groups | 5.9  | 5.4  | 5.8  | 5.7  | 6.0  | 5.8  | 6.0  | 6.0  | 6.4  |
| Democratic political parties  | 5.6  | 5.2  | 5.4  | 5.9  | 6.0  | 5.9  | 5.2  | 5.1  | 5.6  |
| Choice for the voter           | 6.2  | 6.0  | 6.2  | 6.0  | 6.1  | 6.2  | 5.8  | 5.8  | 6.5  |
| Identifiable local representation | 5.1  | 4.8  | 5.4  | 4.5  | 3.8  | 4.0  | 6.0  | 6.1  | 6.2  |
| Encouragement to participate   | 6.0  | 5.6  | 5.8  | 5.7  | 5.4  | 5.4  | 5.0  | 5.4  | 5.9  |
| Equality of the vote           | 5.7  | 5.5  | 5.9  | 6.2  | 6.5  | 6.4  | —    | —    | —    |
| Simplicity                     | —    | —    | 4.2  | 5.5  | 5.9  | 5.9  | 4.8  | 5.1  | 5.6  |

Scores on 1–7 scales: not important to extremely important. Three points in time: T1 is the end of the learning phase, T2 is the midpoint, and T3 is after the final decision.
that assembly members were quite prepared to differentiate the systems themselves (Table 4.1). It is striking, however, that voter choice emerged at the end of the deliberative process as the highest rated value in both Canadian assemblies and one of the most highly rated among Dutch members. This is a value that typically gets little attention in the political science literature. That members of all three assemblies should all rate it so highly suggests that citizens bring a distinctive perspective to the debates about electoral systems, a viewpoint that emphasizes the interests of voters and the nature of the choice they are offered on their ballots.

A second striking feature of these value assessments is how little they changed over the course of the respective assembly experiences. Readings taken at three important points in the life of the assembly hardly moved at all. In the case of the British Columbia and the Netherlands assemblies, some scores climbed marginally while others fell a bit. In Ontario, every criterion was actually rated modestly higher at the end of the process. This aggregate steadiness mirrors similar individual-level stability in value ratings. On average, across assemblies and criteria, 75 per cent of members gave each value the same importance rating from the first to the last measurements (T1 and T3). The evidence indicates that these kinds of fundamental judgemental orientations were not significantly altered by the assemblies’ lengthy deliberations.

One value that moved somewhat over time was local representation. This idea – central to the difference between majoritarian and proportional systems, and generally portrayed as one of the principal virtues of SMP systems – was one many members struggled with. Initially, lower scores in both British Columbia and the Netherlands testify to the lower consensus about its importance. Its shifting ratings (falling then rising slightly in both those assemblies) reflected members’ greater willingness to change their minds about the place it ought to have in electoral system design.

Most importantly, the third lesson drawn from an examination of the members’ declared values is that their movement over time in British Columbia does not lead to any direct or easy prediction of what electoral system they would prefer between MMP and STV. To explore this further, we concentrate on a few specific criteria. Three particular criteria are directly tied to specific electoral system design issues: proportionality (‘fair representation of parties’), vital to questions of the appropriate formula; local representation, critical to the issue of district magnitude (the number to be elected in a given electoral district); and voter choice, important for questions of ballot form. There is a potential tension among these values. For instance, strengthening the proportional dimension of a system requires increasing the number of representatives chosen in any given individual district, but to do so is generally perceived to weaken local representation. It is just this tension between these two values that is at the heart of classic debates between advocates of proportional representation and ‘first-past-the-post’.

3 For instance, voter choice is not listed as a relevant criterion in Bowler et al.’s survey (2005) of electoral system experts.

4 Again, we tolerate scores that were off the mark by a single point.
In principle, the balance of member’s views on these criteria could have been important to their evaluations of systems. If they clearly came to appreciate one dimension over the others, then that priority might have led to a certain outcome. Figure 4.2 illustrates the evolution of the members’ appraisals of the importance of these three critical values in British Columbia (data from Table 4.2). Again, it is evident that members were reluctant to choose between the values. High importance was placed on all three dimensions, though voter choice was rated highest, followed by proportionality and then local representation. More centrally, all three criteria fluctuated to some extent over time, but their relative importance was not dramatically altered. This pattern does not in any obvious way concord with a switch in preferences from MMP to STV during the deliberative phase.

So, this chapter’s major puzzle remains intact. Why did the first citizen assembly alter its comparative judgements of MMP and STV during the course of its activities? The evolution of the importance that members attached to these judgement criteria cannot account for the opinion reversal. This leads us to examine the dynamics of the connections between the criteria and the ratings of electoral systems.

4.4 THE VARYING IMPACT OF CRITERIA ON PREFERENCES?

While assembly members thought all of these values were important, they could still have learned that some were more directly relevant to the decisions their mandates called for. Even a reluctance (or inability) to make sharp distinctions

![Figure 4.2](image-url)
among underlying criteria on importance scales does not mean assembly members were confounded and incapable of basing their electoral system choice in terms of clearly defined value priorities. Perhaps members came to realize that opinions on electoral systems ought to be driven by pertinent considerations and trade-offs. Concretely, this logic implies that the effects of the judgement criteria on system preferences might have evolved over time, despite the fact that average importance assessments stayed essentially stable. Such a dynamic could explain why the average ratings of MMP and STV in British Columbia were transformed halfway through to the ultimate advantage of the latter. In fact, it is clear that successive phases of the assembly process saw the relationships between criteria and preferences shift and then crystallize in the final deliberations.

Table 4.3 provides a measure of the members’ decision-making by capturing the relative weight of the three criteria on comparative judgements of the two competing systems over time. It reports the results of OLS regression analyses. The dependent variable is the difference between the scores given to STV and MMP respectively. So a positive coefficient indicates the independent variable is positively correlated to ratings of STV. The independent variables range from 1 to 7, while the dependent variables theoretically span from –6 to 6.

None of the three criteria governed the British Columbian’s preferences between STV and MMP at the end of the learning phase. This was quite different from the circumstances in the other two assemblies where, by that early stage of their process, proportionality was strongly driving a preference for MMP (over STV) in Ontario and for open-list PR (over MMP) in the Netherlands. Then, as the consultation phase ended in British Columbia, it is evident that the members’ electoral system choices were being powerfully driven by both proportionality and a concern for identifiable local representation. At that point, both criteria were

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>T1 (learning)</th>
<th>T2 (midpoint)</th>
<th>T3 (final)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fair representation of parties</td>
<td>–0.09</td>
<td>–0.39**</td>
<td>–0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice for the voter</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifiable local representation</td>
<td>–0.00</td>
<td>–0.17**</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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** Significant at 0.05; * significant at 0.10. Numbers are OLS regression coefficients. The dependent variable is the rating of STV minus the rating of MMP.

5 Comparable results for the assemblies in Ontario and the Netherlands are not shown here, as their stories are so straightforward. They can be found in Carty and Rose (2007).
leading strongly towards a preference for MMP. Had a decision been forced then, before the members came back to deliberate, it might well have resulted in a recommendation for MMP.

British Columbia’s subsequent deliberative phase produced a dramatic shift in assembly members’ understanding of these key criteria and how they connect to the two electoral systems. As the results representing views at the end of the process indicate, proportionality basically ceased to be a determining factor, and the impact of local representation was completely reversed so that those believing the latter to be important now supported STV. Both changes can be directly attributed to members’ activity during the deliberation period.

Proportionality continued to be a highly rated value for British Columbians, and more highly rated than local representation (see Figure 4.2), but it simply disappears during the deliberative phase as a significant determinant in their choice of which system to recommend. This appears to have been the direct result of the members’ examination of each system’s proportional dimension. One member prepared a comparative analysis, including several hundred computer simulations, of the likely difference between STV and MMP systems on plausible electoral outcomes for the seventy-nine-seat British Columbia legislative assembly. The discussion of that analysis led members to conclude that there would not be a significant practical difference between the two systems in terms of the proportionality of election results. This had the effect of removing proportionality as an influential consideration in the choice between STV and MMP.

Members completely reversed the linkages on the issue of having an identifiable local representative. Before the deliberative phase started, those who thought it important were inclined to prefer MMP. By the end of the assembly, those committed to it found themselves preferring STV. This shift reflects the difficulty that many members had in dealing with the concept of local representation and its diverse implementation in various systems. It was at once the most familiar aspect of the existing system, and also the source of its non-proportionality. Members’ comparatively lower average rating of the importance of local representation testified to that tension and underlay the greater variation among members about its relevance – a variance that did not shrink as a result of the prolonged debate. With proportionality no longer decisive, opinions among members about the salience and very meaning of local representation became the critical issue in the debates of the deliberative phase.

Local representation is an inherent aspect of both alternative systems. MMP maintains single-member districts but, in order to create the party list portion of the system, the absolute number of single-member districts must shrink (unless the legislature increases in size, a prospect ruled out in British Columbia). Concretely,

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6 Chapter 6 provides a further consideration of individual members’ influence on assembly decision-making.
How did the Decisions Come About?

this meant that the assembly’s MMP model was left with individual electoral districts about twice as large as those currently in place. That was hardly unimaginable for it would have made the provincial legislative districts about the same size as those from British Columbia in the national parliament. In contrast, the assembly’s proposed STV model did not require any reduction in the total number of locally chosen representatives, although all would now be elected in multi-member districts of varying size. For many members, such districts would have been familiar given that they were a feature of the British Columbia electoral map as recently as 1991.

Through the course of their discussion and debate, the members most keenly committed to local representation came to believe that STV would best serve their interests: all representatives would be locally responsible. By the end of the second deliberation weekend, 66 per cent of the members naming local representation as their first or second most important criteria ranked STV as the best system for the province (only 6 per cent of them identified SMP). These were the individuals who led the assembly to its final choice for the STV.

4.5 CONCLUSION

This story of the three assemblies as they worked through their learning, consultation, and deliberative phases suggests that, given a focused mandate and carefully structured process, citizens can find their way to decide on complex and technical public policy issues like electoral reform. The members of these similarly structured assemblies all faced the same topic, used similar expertise and parallel proceedings, yet each set of them came up with a different response.

Both the Dutch and Ontario citizens appear to have quickly reached their respective consensus – the former to maintain the essence of their existing system, the latter to recommend a new MMP system – by the end of the learning phase. The early recognition by each assembly’s members of these strong electoral system preferences quickly determined their central decision, and thus most of their respective deliberation phases were devoted to discussions of detail rather than a sustained or far-reaching deliberative debate about different system families.

Quite a different path was followed by the members of the British Columbia assembly as they, like their Ontario counterparts, also came to a recommendation for change. They exited the learning phase with divided views and considerable openness to full debate, but their deliberative reflections took a different turn despite the fact that they too were choosing between MMP and STV. With proportionality neutralized, their decision hinged on local representation. During the deliberation phase, many members appear to have changed their mind about
just how they understood the very notion of local representation as a working dimension of these two electoral systems. Those debates, coupled with an enthusiasm for the opportunities STV provides to voters for expressing individual preferences, shaped the assembly’s eventual choice.

More generally, this chapter has shown that the opinions of ordinary citizens directly involved in an extensive exercise of public decision-making do not evolve chaotically over time. Assembly members’ views about electoral systems developed gradually as they were acquiring information about the various options. These attitudes then remained quite stable over the subsequent months. Very little aggregate or individual volatility characterized the consultation and deliberation phases. Only once did a significant movement of opinion occur – the shift from MMP to STV in British Columbia – a preference reversal that was rooted in the understandable reconsidérations fostered by the deliberative process itself.

These findings are also relevant for our understanding of representative and deliberative democracy. Both learning and deliberation matter. First, the acquisition of information had an impact on preferences. Not only are ordinary people able to learn about a difficult policy issue, as they do so their opinions of the current situation and potential alternatives change in consequence. Second, discussion of the issue among assembly members also affected their preferences, but only in British Columbia. There, the deliberative phase generated attitude change and resulted in an outcome different from the one that would have emerged if the decision had been taken earlier.

Having traced the dynamics of citizen judgements across an almost year-long process of learning, consultation, and deliberation, we turn to ask if this all led to them making the ‘right’ decisions. That question is the focus of Chapter 5.
Did the Citizen Assemblies Make the Right Decisions?

[The] audience, tuning in and tuning off here and there, cannot be counted upon to hear, even in summary form, the essential evidence and the main arguments on all the significant sides of a question. Rarely, and on very few public issues, does the mass audience have the benefit of the process by which truth is sifted from error – the dialectic of debate in which there is immediate challenge, reply, cross-examination, and rebuttal.


One of this book’s central concerns is with the competence of citizens. We expect that individuals’ political proficiency is not fixed but instead varies in response to context and motivation. Participants in a citizen assembly should be willing to invest much more time and effort in the endeavour precisely because it offers greater prospects for affecting politics than does everyday routine political life. We have already seen that citizens who take part in these policymaking exercises take their role seriously and dedicate themselves to the task. They become interested, engaged, and knowledgeable about electoral systems (Chapter 2). We have also demonstrated that assembly members’ electoral system preferences did not fluctuate haphazardly, they emerged as knowledge accumulated and then generally remained constant or moved in reasonable ways (Chapter 4). But that does not mean assembly members became sufficiently competent to make ‘good choices’. This chapter investigates a delicate but critical topic: the quality of assembly decisions.

It is not obvious how decision quality is best assessed. What criteria should be used? One possibility is to look at the outcome of the process, at how the proposals were received by those who had to make the final decision – in these cases the governments and publics of the respective political communities. Should we conclude that, since all three reforms failed to be implemented, the assemblies must have made bad choices? We do not think so. After all, the assemblies were charged to propose the best electoral system, not the most acceptable one. Also, less knowledgeable governments and publics may not be the best judge of the decisions rendered by better-informed citizen assemblies. Rather than look at the outcomes, we examine the decision-making process leading up to the choices.
In this chapter, we ascertain whether the selection of electoral systems was consistent with the principles held by the participants. Consistency is a common quality criterion (Converse 1964, 1970; Luskin 1987). It refers to ‘the organization of opinions – the extent to which people’s opinions are logically or ideologically consistent with other views they hold and with their general values and attitudes’ (Price and Neijens 1997: 345).

The standard assumption in the electoral systems literature is that no system is inherently better than another. With many competing goals and principles at stake, there are unavoidable trade-offs (Blais and Massicotte 2002). Particular electoral systems institutionalize goals and principles differently (Farrell 2001). From this perspective, the choice of an electoral system should be related to the principles deemed most important. Since individuals have different priorities, their preferences for electoral systems should differ along those lines. In addition, differences in the collective choices made by groups of individuals seem bound to stem from aggregate differences in priorities. We are interested in both the micro and the macro aspects of assembly decision-making. In the language of social choice theory (List and Pettitt 2002; Pettitt 2003), we want to ascertain both the internal consistency between anterior premises and the final judgement among assembly members, as well as the collective consistency between the aggregate distributions of premises and the final judgement of each assembly. Concretely, we examine both the individual-level correlates of electoral system preferences and the coherence of the ultimate collective decisions reached by the three assemblies.

Focusing on consistency is not unproblematic. To do so successfully requires that there be clear expectations with which to compare the actual behaviour. Fortunately, there are some well-established relationships between principles and preferences in the literature on electoral systems. For instance, a citizen that adheres to the idea of proportional election results should prefer a proportional representation (PR) system over a system with single-member districts.

Specifically, this chapter tackles four questions. First, were individuals’ preferences concerning electoral systems consistent with their principles? Electoral systems have consequences for various aspects of the political system. Notably, they shape the proportionality of election results, the presence (or absence) of geographic affiliations for representatives, the selection of candidates within parties, the complexity of the transfer of votes into seats, the number of viable political parties, the party composition of governments (e.g. a coalition versus a single party), and the representation of women and minorities in parliament (Farrell 2001; van der Kolk and Thomassen 2006). Our task is to determine whether assembly members’ evaluations of electoral systems were related to their attitudes towards these topics.

Second, did the consistency between preferences and principles evolve over time? Each assembly worked for almost an entire year on electoral systems. Did they need all this time to master the subject? Deliberation ought to bring about a shared understanding of the topic, but how much time does it take to do so? We
examine whether the relationships between evaluations of electoral systems and relevant attitudes crystallized early or whether they continued to increase in strength during the course of the proceedings.

Third, did members’ political sophistication influence the consistency between their preferences and principles? More knowledgeable citizens are thought to be better equipped to deal with complex political issues. But the extensive deliberative process might have levelled the playing field by providing the less knowledgeable with the ability to catch up. We consider whether there were important differences between the decision correlates of the (initially) better informed and those of the less informed.

Finally, were the assemblies’ final collective choices reasonable? Ultimately, the three citizen assemblies recommended three different electoral systems. Given that electoral systems constitute trade-offs between competing principles, we assess whether each assembly’s proposal was compatible with its particular set of aggregate priorities and values.

5.1 HOW TO GAUGE CONSISTENCY?

To uncover whether members’ preferences concerning electoral systems were related to their principles, we explore the correlations between system evaluations and seven relevant objectives and values. The dependent variables are members’ ratings of different electoral systems (introduced in Chapter 4). Here, we confine the analysis to the four systems that were seriously considered by the three assemblies: single member plurality (SMP), single transferable vote (STV), mixed member proportional (MMP), and open-list PR (list-PR).

We expect individual preferences about electoral systems to be congruent with views about system features and with general outlooks towards politics and change. Indeed, this is how the judgements of electoral systems by experts have

| Table 5.1 Anticipated Relationships between Determinants and System Evaluations |
|-------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
|                              | SMP | STV | MMP | List-PR |
| Fair representation of parties | −   | +   | +   | + |
| Choice for the voter          | −   | +   | +   | − |
| Identifiable local representation | + | +   | +   | − |
| Simplicity                    | +   | −   | −   | + |
| Anti-party sentiment          | −   | +   | −   | − |
| Aversion to change            | +/− | −   | −   | +/− |
| Small party support           | −   | +   | +   | + |

−: Negative relationship; +: positive relationship.
been explained (Bowler et al. 2005; Bowler and Farrell 2006). The anticipated relationships are summarized in Table 5.1.

First, we include assessments of the priorities of assembly members as captured by the importance ratings they give to specific aspects of electoral systems. Four are widely associated with competing systems – fair representation of parties, choice for the voter, identifiable local representation, and simplicity – and the expected relationships are relatively straightforward.¹ People who care for fair representation ought to have less favourable ratings of SMP than the three PR systems, since SMP leads to non-proportional election results (Rae 1969; Lijphart 1994). On voter choice, STV and MMP should be favoured since they offer preference ranking and two votes, respectively, while SMP and open-list PR only provide a single vote.² In contrast, those who favour local representation should like SMP, though they may also be well served by the multi-member districts of STV and by MMP, while open-list PR (especially if based on national lists) clearly delivers the least local representation. Finally, individuals who seek simplicity should consider positively SMP and list-PR, two systems where votes are converted into seats in a more straightforward fashion than either STV or MMP.

Then, we have three general political values that ought to be pertinent for views about electoral reform. Anti-party sentiment measures dissatisfaction with political parties. Those who score high consider that political parties do not do a good job of ‘presenting clear choices on the issues’, ‘finding solutions to important problems’, and ‘expressing the concerns of ordinary people’. We would anticipate the most dissatisfied assembly members to be particularly wary of giving too much power to political parties. Thus, they should dislike SMP, a system that tends to be dominated by two strong parties, and systems based on party lists (list-PR and MMP). In contrast, people disappointed by parties should appreciate STV, which allows voters a greater ability to discriminate among party candidates and opens electoral competition to independents.

Aversion to change refers to non-ideological conservatism. Based on McClosky’s seminal scale (1958), change-averse individuals think that risky reforms are not worth trying, that ‘it’s better to stick by what you have’, they want to know that ‘something really works before taking a chance on it’, and they do not like taking risks. Obviously, those who loath change ought to oppose reform, they should instead support the status quo (Nadeau et al. 1999). In these three

¹ Three of these objectives had been formally adopted by the two Canadian assemblies as key features they wished to see institutionalized in an electoral system, but we have yet to see evidence that they were actually correlated to preferences.

² MMP does not always provide two separate votes, but the alternative MMP systems constructed in British Columbia and Ontario did propose one vote for a local candidate and another for a party list. Open-list PR systems do offer a wide range of vote options between candidates and parties, but most often voters cast only one ballot (though there are a few instances of panachage and vote cumulation).
assemblies, risk-aversion should be positively linked to feelings towards the existing electoral system (SMP in the Canadian assemblies, and list-PR in the Netherlands), and negatively related to alternative systems (STV and MMP).

Finally, participants’ partisan affinities may well affect their system preferences. The choice of an electoral system is likely to influence the fortunes of political parties. Generally, a more proportional system benefits smaller parties, and a less proportional system advantages larger parties. Members may have been inclined to choose a system that would help the party they prefer. Yet, we do not expect partisan affinities to have a powerful effect in citizen assemblies for two reasons. First, party identification is often considered a shortcut that people use when they do not have much information on a given issue (Sniderman et al. 1991). Since members of citizen assemblies were exposed to an abundance of information, they did not need shortcuts. Second, participants were explicitly invited to think about the system that would be best for the province or country as a whole, they were encouraged to deliberate and to have an open mind, and they were exposed to a diversified set of perspectives. However, in spite of these favourable conditions, we should not rule out the possibility that assembly members, or at least some of them, ultimately preferred the system that would most benefit the party that they personally supported. If that was the case, supporters of smaller parties should be more favourable to PR (in its various forms) than supporters of larger parties, because smaller parties are bound to do much better in PR than in non-PR systems.

5.2 WERE PREFERENCES ABOUT ELECTORAL SYSTEMS CONSISTENT WITH PRINCIPLES?

To establish whether there was, by the end of the assembly processes, clear consistency between these seven principles and the evaluations of electoral systems, we examined the empirical relationships between them. Table 5.2 reports the results from a regression analysis in which data from all three citizen assemblies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SMP</th>
<th>STV</th>
<th>MMP</th>
<th>List-PR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fair representation of parties</td>
<td>-0.19**</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.29**</td>
<td>0.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice for the voter</td>
<td>-0.23**</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.23**</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifiable local representation</td>
<td>0.31**</td>
<td>0.27**</td>
<td>0.16**</td>
<td>-0.15**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simplicity</td>
<td>0.11**</td>
<td>-0.34**</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.17**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-party sentiment</td>
<td>-0.26**</td>
<td>0.28**</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aversion to change</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.39**</td>
<td>-0.42**</td>
<td>0.19*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small party support</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( N )</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( R^2 )</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Significant at 0.05;
* significant at 0.10. Numbers are OLS regression coefficients. All variables range from 0 to 1.
were pooled together.\(^3\) The analysis reveals that individual preferences concerning electoral systems were indeed structured by principles. Close to two-thirds of the relationships are statistically significant, despite there being only 276 cases. Also, the model fit statistics are reasonably high for such individual data. Moreover, the relationships make sense, they follow our expectations.

Support for *proportionality* was a significant predictor of three electoral system evaluations. Assembly members who valued it were significantly more likely to give SMP a negative score and to give MMP and open-list PR a positive score. Thus, more proportional systems were more liked by those who considered fair representation an important objective.

*Voter choice* affected the ratings of two systems. Those who find it important rejected SMP, the system that only offers one vote for a local candidate. They also disliked MMP. They were slightly more likely to have a favourable opinion of STV, the system that allows voters to rank order as many candidates from different parties as they wish, but the impact does not attain statistical significance.

Attitudes towards *identifiable local representation* were linked to preferences for all four systems. This priority is related to lower ratings of open-list PR, while being associated with more positive scores for SMP, STV, and MMP. Considering list-PR often does not provide local representation while the three other systems do deliver it, these links are sound.

*Simplicity* also had a significant impact on feelings towards three electoral systems. More favourable assessments of SMP and open-list PR were expressed by those preferring a simple system. Conversely, STV was slightly hampered among people who care about simplicity. All three of these relationships fall in line with expectations.

*Anti-party sentiment* among assembly members was negatively correlated with preferences for SMP. A similar, though not significant, relationship existed for ratings of list-PR. These results are congruous with the interpretation that individuals dissatisfied with parties tend to have lower evaluations of systems that revolve around strong parties. In contrast, anti-party sentiment was positively correlated with assessments of STV, a system that fosters intra-party competition and permits rankings of candidates from various party affiliations.

As expected, *aversion to change* has a negative impact on evaluations of the two systems that constituted departures from the status quo for all three assemblies (STV and MMP). The risk-averse would be expected to favour their existing system. To uncover this behaviour, we need to disaggregate the pooled data. Separate analyses of each assembly confirm that the positive list-PR effect found in Table 5.2 is in fact driven by the Dutch Burgerforum, while a parallel relationship emerges for SMP in the Canadian cases.

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\(^3\) All variables were measured during the final wave of the assembly panel surveys. More details about them can be found in Appendix 2.
Finally, we can ask if the preferences of assembly members were influenced by their partisan leanings? The evidence suggests that the answer is no, for there are no significant differences in system evaluations between the supporters of small and large political parties. And this is not due to intervening variables; we find the same lack of a relationship in analyses where controls are dropped. Even among those who voted for big parties, ‘first-past-the-post’ gets much lower scores than each of the three proportional systems. This is a truly striking finding. It is fair to say that political parties were the actors that would be most directly affected by any change to (or maintenance of) the electoral system. Yet, the assembly members appear to have been completely unmoved by their personal partisan inclinations. These results are entirely consonant with our own observation of the process. Members were genuinely struggling to find the ‘best’ system for their community, and whether any option might benefit or hurt any specific party was not a relevant consideration.

Thus, apart from the exception of partisanship, each of these principles is related to evaluations of some electoral systems. We can tell the story another way – in terms of the electoral systems themselves. Such an account points to members holding sensibly structured preferences. Ratings of SMP regimes were linked to five of the seven factors. SMP was popular among persons who care about local representation and simplicity, who tolerate non-proportionality and restricted voter choice, and who accept political parties. These relationships provide a good depiction of SMP: a simple non-proportional system which, by privileging local representation and offering modest voter choice, is typically dominated by a few strong parties.

Judgements about the STV were governed by two specific dimensions of electoral systems and by two more general dispositions. STV was rated more favourably by assembly participants who care for local representation and those who express partisan disaffection. It was not supported by those adverse to change or in favour of a simple system. This combination reflects quite accurately the characterization of STV within the literature on electoral systems: a relatively complex proportional system that provides particular but extensive local representation and whose ballot structure gives more discretion to voters.

Evaluations of MMP were moulded by four variables. MMP was appraised positively by persons who seek fair election results and those who are interested in local representation. It was not favoured by people who value voter choice or those who fear change. This depiction of MMP also fits with reality: an electoral system which generates proportional outcomes and delivers local representatives, but which offers voters less choice than STV.

Lastly, assessments of open-list PR also hinged upon four considerations. This system received higher ratings from people who desire a faithful translation of votes into seats, simplicity, and (among the Dutch) are risk-averse. It only garnered lower ratings from those who want MPs tied to localities. This is, presumably, what electoral system experts would anticipate, for list-PR is generally
understood to be a simple proportional system with little in the way of significant geographic representation.

The results reported in Table 5.2 are derived from an analysis that combines the data from all three assemblies. It is therefore important to ask whether there were important differences between them. Given the small number of cases (100 or less), separate regression analyses inevitably produce much fewer significant effects. Nevertheless, the coefficients are generally in the same direction, though some are inconsistent across assemblies.

Overall, assembly preferences regarding electoral systems were not the product of haphazard reasoning or random guesses. Individual opinions were coherently linked with features of electoral systems and relevant values. Citizen assembly members who liked or disliked particular institutional designs were looking for specific characteristics and outcomes from the voting system.

Of course, as with any correlational evidence, we cannot be sure about the direction of causality. It may be that rationalization was at work. Perhaps assembly participants adjusted their attitudes to fit a particular choice of electoral system. We suggest, however, that preferences and principles did not develop this way. Based on our close observation of the deliberative processes, we believe that assembly members were searching for the design that best accommodated their long-standing objectives and values. Evidence presented in Chapter 4 also supports this view. In British Columbia, opinions about electoral systems changed markedly during the proceedings while the importance attached to priorities remained essentially intact. Assembly members seem to have brought their preferences in line with their principles rather than the other way around.

In the final section of this chapter, we ascertain whether the final collective choices of the assemblies—their recommendation for the best electoral system for their jurisdiction—were appropriate or not. Beforehand, we investigate the presence of dynamics and heterogeneity in individual decision-making.

### 5.3 DID THE CONSISTENCY OF PREFERENCES AND PRINCIPLES INCREASE OVER TIME?

Deliberative democracy is assumed to be ‘an ongoing activity of mutual reason giving’ which induces participants to reflect more thoroughly about the pros and cons of various options (Gutmann and Thompson 2000: 168). As a consequence, we would expect members of deliberative bodies to become more capable of forming opinions on the basis of principles as the process unfolds. Does this logic also apply to citizen assemblies that extend over numerous months? The links between preferences and their determinants might have crystallized as early as the end of the formal learning phase. This would indicate that knowledge acquisition
was all that assembly members required to develop an electoral system choice that reflected their personal goals and values. Then again, the level of opinion constraint might have continued to increase during the discussions and debates of the consultation and deliberation phases. Such a pattern would reveal that citizens did benefit from more work in order to gain a better grasp of the topic.

To ascertain whether the consistency between evaluations of electoral systems and principles increased in strength over the life of the citizen assemblies, Table 5.3 compares the structure of opinion at three key junctures: at the end of the learning phase after assembly members had completed their crash-course on electoral systems (T1), during the mid-year break that followed the consultation phase (T2), and at the end of the proceedings after the assemblies had chosen their final recommendation (T3). Thus, the third column for each system simply reproduces the results of Table 5.2.

Clearly, the structure of opinion changed after the learning phase – there were dynamics at work. But it would be inaccurate to assert that all the correlations between principles and preferences simply became stronger over time. Some actually weakened. Nevertheless, the dominant pattern is one of movement towards greater consistency. By and large, preferences exhibited more consistency after the assemblies’ deliberations. For each electoral system, the number of significant coefficients was bigger by the end than it had been earlier. The size of the model fit statistics also tended to be larger at the conclusion of the process.

Views about electoral systems were initially constrained by a small number of objectives and values. By the end of the assemblies, more factors mattered. For instance, after the first part of the process, assessments of open-list PR only revolved around notions of proportionality and local representation. Months later, beliefs pertaining to simplicity and aversion to change had surfaced as relevant. Similarly, the other systems saw variables materialize as significant predictors over time: voter choice and partisan disaffection for SMP; anti-party sentiment for STV; voter choice, local representation, and aversion to change for MMP.

An examination of the story in each of the assemblies yields an interesting discrepancy. In the Netherlands, system preferences were more highly structured after the learning phase than at the end of the entire proceedings. Why such a distinct and unexpected pattern? The Burgerforum process differed in one major way from the Canadian cases. Since its recommendation would go to the government rather than a binding public referendum, the Dutch assembly was more consultative and less decisive. One could surmise that the lower stakes might have resulted in lower motivations among Dutch participants, and this might explain an overall weaker level of constraint. However, that story cannot account for the pattern actually observed – high opinion consistency at the end of the learning period which then dissipates.

Instead, the discrepancy must stem from the particular manner in which the Dutch assembly unfolded. The Burgerforum had essentially disregarded all
### Table 5.3 Dynamics over Time, Determinants of System Evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SMP</th>
<th>STV</th>
<th>MMP</th>
<th>List-PR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T1</td>
<td>T2</td>
<td>T3</td>
<td>T1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair repres.</td>
<td>-0.31**</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.19**</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voter choice</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-0.23**</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local repres.</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
<td>0.26**</td>
<td>0.31**</td>
<td>0.11**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simplicity</td>
<td>0.20**</td>
<td>0.10*</td>
<td>0.11**</td>
<td>-0.25**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-party</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>-0.26**</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aversion</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small party</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Significant at 0.05; *significant at 0.10. Numbers are OLS regression coefficients. All variables range from 0 to 1.
families of electoral systems except variations of list-PR by the time it started its deliberation phase. Thus, all its debates were essentially focused on identifying which form of list-PR would be best for the country. Participants then lost touch with other systems because they were no longer actively discussing them. This case indicates that newly mastered material can quickly fade from memory when people do not reflect on it, when they do not need it anymore. It also means that Table 5.3 understates the increase in belief system consistency that occurred among the Canadian assembly members.

In sum, deliberation reinforced the consistency of opinions throughout the citizen assemblies. Even an extensive period of information acquisition did not crystallize the structure of the pertinent belief system. Deliberation continued to strengthen the relationships between preferences and principles during the almost year-long process. In addition, the evidence teaches us that consistency not only increases, it can easily begin to wane, as in the instance of the Netherlands, once certain dilemmas and options are no longer under active consideration.

5.4 ARE THE POLITICALLY SOPHISTICATED MORE CONSISTENT?

One may wonder whether the consistency of electoral system preferences was driven by the most politically sophisticated members of each assembly. There is mounting evidence of inter-individual heterogeneity in political behaviour attributable to political sophistication (Sniderman et al. 1991; Zaller 1992; Miller and Krosnick 2000; Fournier 2006). We know that some assembly participants had been more exposed to politics than others. Was it easier for them to deal with the learning material circulated and to think coherently about the consequences of each electoral system? If that was the case, then perhaps the observed consistency between system evaluations and relevant principles was limited to the more politically engaged citizens.

We can test this idea by determining whether the structure of opinion varies according to assembly members’ initial level of political information. Information was measured in the pre-assembly questionnaires using a nine-item battery of factual knowledge questions about political figures and electoral systems. The resulting knowledge scale allows us to separate memberships into thirds, and to compare the decision-making of the least and most informed citizens.

Beforehand, we need to point out that the dependent variables did not differ across information levels. The average evaluations of the four electoral systems

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4 This operationalization follows established practice (Zaller 1990; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993, 1996). The knowledge questions are listed in Appendix 2.
among the less and the more knowledgeable participants were very similar, and none of the differences was significant. Next, we examine the correlates of the preferences of the two information groups.

Table 5.4 presents regression results of split-sample analyses for the lowest and highest thirds of the information scale. The decision determinants did vary by knowledge. The effects tended to be in the same direction across both groups, but some coefficients were larger among one group, and some coefficients were only significant among one group. In a few instances, a significant relationship appeared solely among the less informed (anti-party sentiment for SMP, risk-aversion for STV, and local representation for list-PR). However, the reverse – significant effects limited to the more knowledgeable respondents – was twice more common. For instance, MMP was evaluated in terms of local representation and aversion to change across all assembly members, but linked to proportionality, voter choice, and anti-party sentiment only by the more informed. The gap in consistency between the two groups is also revealed by the model fit statistics: the $R^2$-squared is larger for every electoral system among the high information group.

Overall, electoral system preferences were more consistent among the more politically sophisticated members of citizen assemblies. The decisions of all information groups were constrained by priorities about the consequences of electoral designs and general political outlooks. But the pattern was stronger among the more knowledgeable participants. Thus, political information does aid in structuring reasoning on a complex problem, and this advantage was not completely eliminated by the long deliberative exercise.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SMP</th>
<th>STV</th>
<th>MMP</th>
<th>List-PR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair representation</td>
<td>−0.14</td>
<td>−0.10</td>
<td>−0.06</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice for the voter</td>
<td>−0.35*</td>
<td>−0.28*</td>
<td>−0.05</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local representation</td>
<td>0.19**</td>
<td>0.38**</td>
<td>0.32**</td>
<td>0.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simplicity</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>−0.26**</td>
<td>−0.32**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-party sentiment</td>
<td>−0.37**</td>
<td>−0.16</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.65**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aversion to change</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>−0.48**</td>
<td>−0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small party support</td>
<td>−0.06</td>
<td>−0.05</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$N$</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Significant at 0.05;  
* significant at 0.10. Numbers are OLS regression coefficients. All variables range from 0 to 1.
5.5 WERE THE ASSEMBLIES’ FINAL CHOICES REASONABLE?

To this point, we have seen that evaluations of electoral systems were correlated with relevant principles at the individual level. The discursive dilemma, however, teaches us that individual consistency between premises and judgements can still lead to collectively incoherent conclusions (List and Pettitt 2002; Pettitt 2003). So, to judge collective decision quality, we need to determine whether each assembly’s specific aggregate principles were compatible with the electoral system it chose.

Table 5.5 reports the aggregate distribution of views within each of the assemblies on the key evaluative criteria and values that members were using. The scores are simply means, standardized on a 0–1 scale, with high scores indicating high importance for the system features, high disaffection with political parties, and high risk-aversion.

The patterns of aggregate preferences help explain why each assembly ended up with a distinct proposal. All the assemblies attached a high degree of importance to the fair transfer of votes into seats and to greater voter choice (see the first two rows of Table 5.5). Consequently, it is not surprising that all three rejected SMP, a system which entails non-proportional results, little choice, and few large political parties. Their logical choice was some form of PR.

But each of the three assemblies picked a different form of PR due to its particular set of other priorities. In British Columbia, four aspects stand out as comparatively distinctive. Members cared substantially for local representation, were less worried about simplicity, were slightly more dissatisfied with political parties, and were not afraid of change. It is coherent that this assembly would opt for recommending STV. That system delivers locally focused representation, its

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5.5 Different Goals for Electoral Systems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>British Columbia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair representation of parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice for the voter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifiable local representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simplicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-party sentiment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aversion to change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral system proposed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Numbers are means of variables that range from 0 to 1.

5 We have excluded small party support because this factor did not substantially connect to preferences in Table 5.2.
vote counting seems less transparent, and it does weaken the power of party bosses.

The evidence indicates that the Dutch assembly members did not really desire local representation, instead they favoured simplicity and were a little more hesitant towards change than those in the other assemblies. This makes their decision to retain list-PR quite comprehensible. That system uses a single vote to allocate seats proportionally in a straightforward fashion without tying representatives to a precise locality.

Finally, in Ontario, the assembly was not risk-averse and it valued a system that was both simple and locally responsive. It is understandable that it would select to switch to a mixed system, for MMP balances concerns for local representation and simplicity by keeping many aspects with which SMP voters are familiar, notably having MPs chosen in a traditional ‘first-past-the-post’ local contest.

Thus, the electoral system reforms put forth by the citizen assemblies were consistent with their respective aggregate goals and values, leading us to believe that their collective decisions were reasonable. They ended up with different proposals because they appreciated and wanted different things.

5.6 CONCLUSION

To evaluate the capacity of citizens to develop and articulate well-reasoned political opinions, this chapter examined the consistency of individual and collective decisions reached within the three citizen assemblies. First, it investigated the relationships between evaluations of electoral systems and several pertinent principles. The analyses showed that individual preferences were indeed anchored by general values and specific objectives of electoral systems. Simply put, the evidence indicates that assembly members developed preferences which were coherent with their particular priorities.

We also explored the dynamics of consistency. The relationships between evaluations of electoral systems and relevant attitudes did change during the course of the citizen assemblies. In the two Canadian cases, the structure of opinions continued to increase throughout the proceedings. In the Netherlands, because the Burgerforum stopped debating certain options, the belief systems actually became less constrained.

In addition, there was some heterogeneity in the consistency of preferences. Both the best and least politically informed assembly participants evaluated electoral systems in terms of values and objectives. Nonetheless, the structure of opinions was more robust among the highly knowledgeable members. Our findings suggest that even an extensive deliberative exercise could not entirely level the playing field.
Finally, opinion consistency prevailed at the aggregate level as well. The distribution of general values and specific objectives within each assembly was compatible with their preferences for electoral systems. The three citizen assembly reform proposals reflected each assembly’s distinct set of collective principles. Ultimately, they opted for different recommendations because their respective goals differed.

Altogether, these results point to quality decision-making and political competence in the extraordinary context of citizen assemblies. Before reaching a final judgement, however, we must ascertain whether the assemblies’ decisions were influenced by insidious external forces. This task is taken up in Chapter 6.
Did the Participants Decide by Themselves?

What’s the thing people remember about the Gulf War? A bomb falling down a chimney. Let me tell you something: I was in the building where we filmed that with a 10-inch model made out of Legos.

Conrad Brean (Robert De Niro), *Wag the Dog* (1997)

In Chapter 5, we explored the extent to which assembly members’ preferences about electoral systems were related to their principles. The evidence demonstrates that there was indeed a clear link between individuals’ objectives and values and the decisions that they reached, and that those decisions made sense and were reasonable. The preceding analysis looked at the internal self-reflective process through which individual participants made up their minds, but there is another dimension to the decision-making: the external influences imposed on the members. In this chapter, we are interested in those influences, asking whether participants may have been convinced how to vote for a particular recommendation by other individuals or groups.

One of the underlying fundamental assumptions of the citizen assemblies is that the members would make independent decisions about which electoral system was most appropriate for their province or country. But why is independence so crucial? The basic idea, derived from the Condorcet jury theorem, is that the larger the group, the more likely it is that a majority of the group will reach a ‘correct’ judgement (Grofman 1975; Grofman and Feld 1988). The theorem, however, is built on the assumption that individuals in the group make up their mind independently. If they were to follow the judgement of an opinion leader within the group, or some outside expert or lobbyist, the *effective* group size would decrease, and so would the probability of a ‘good’ decision (Grofman et al. 1983: 273). This is why Grofman and colleagues named one of their theorems: ‘Think for yourself, John’.

In addition, a lack of independence contradicts pseudorandom selection. Citizen assemblies, by the way they are composed, represent the public. But the process can only be legitimate if participants decide autonomously. If the assembly members were to fall under the sway of some external actors – the chair or staff of the assembly, interest groups, or some other powerful political actor – they no longer can be said to represent the public.

We examine some of these possible outside influences in this chapter. The first possibility is other individuals in the assemblies. Members spent a lot of time
Did the Participants Decide by Themselves?

together, not only discussing electoral systems but also engaging in a wide variety of social exchanges (i.e. schmoozing). How much impact did these exchanges have? Our concern here is not with the full deliberative process but in the potential effect of particularly influential opinion leaders in the assemblies. Is it possible that the final decision in each assembly was shaped by a few individuals who were particularly trusted or particularly adept at convincing other members?

The second set of potential influences includes the people charged with organizing and directing the assembly activities. On the one hand, there were the experts responsible for educating the members on the substantive issues of their agenda. We focus on the research directors who were in charge of the learning process as well as the experts who were invited to present lectures. They were well positioned to influence, deliberately or involuntarily, the whole process. This could have occurred either because they put too much or too little emphasis on some aspects of the subject or because they framed the information and options in a biased way that made some choices more or less likely. So is there any evidence of this? On the other hand, we also need to examine the role played by the chairs, appointed to manage the organization and run the proceedings. They set the agenda, decided how much or little time to leave for discussions, dealt with whatever issues came up in the meetings, and ultimately established when and how decisions should be reached. We consider the chairs’ responsibilities and activities to determine how they might have unduly affected the course of events.

Third, we ascertain the impact, if any, of the public consultations which took place after the learning phase but before the assemblies started their deliberative discussions. That aspect of the process was intended to obtain feedback from the public, informing members about the extent to which there was support for the status quo and how much interest there was for the various reform options. Did those consultations mould the assemblies’ final recommendations?

Finally, we turn to political parties. They were, after all, the institutions which were most likely to be directly affected by any modification to the electoral system. They had an obvious and immediate stake in the process and its outcome, so they could be expected to try and influence them. Did parties play a part in the decisions taken by assembly members?

6.1 OPINION LEADERSHIP WITHIN CITIZEN ASSEMBLIES

The first question that we address is whether the final decisions reached by the citizen assemblies may have been shaped by a small number of individual members who moved their colleagues in one particular direction.

Deliberation theorists argue that the process of deliberation contributes to better decisions because it provides the participants with the opportunity to consider a wider
array of evidence or facts than they might otherwise confront (Rawls 1971: 359; Fishkin 1995: 28; Page 1996: 2). However, critics of deliberation contend that while this may well be true in theory, practice often differs. They are particularly concerned that the participants in a deliberative setting are themselves far from being equal. Mansbridge goes so far as to suggest that, because communication skills are so crucial in such settings, deliberation actually 'accentuates rather than redresses the disadvantage of those with least power in a society' (1980: 277).

This leads us to examine two potential scenarios of unequal influence in the citizen assemblies. The first is the possibility that a few specific individuals with strong preferences on the issue of electoral reform were able to convince the (less committed) majority to choose their option. The second is that the better-educated members of these assemblies had a much greater influence on the final decisions than the less educated.

Ascertaining the power of various actors on a specific issue is not simple, especially because influence can be both direct and indirect, and because some forms of influence are notoriously hard to identify (see Harsanyi 1962; Riker 1964; Dahl 1970; Blais 1974). In these cases, there was a lot of interaction between assembly members. They were all heavily involved in the formal activities of the assemblies: exchanging information and perspectives in the plenary and small-group sessions, and on their website. They socialized a great deal during the meeting weekends, at mealtimes, and in evening get-togethers, and many developed strong friendships that led to continuing relationships between meetings. So there was much opportunity for mutual influence and there is little doubt that many members were affected by conversations with colleagues in the assembly. Inevitably, mutual influence moved in all kinds of directions. Individual A may have been influenced by an important comment made by individual B, but individual B was equally strongly influenced by individual A's argument on another point. In such a process, everyone may be influential but no one is powerful enough to drive the collective outcome.

The question that we are concerned with is whether there is any evidence to suggest that, in these assemblies dealing with complex and unfamiliar issues, a small group of opinion leaders or the better educated in general may have shaped the final decisions that were made. We start with the issue of personal influence.

6.1.1 The influence of a few opinion leaders

We asked assembly members themselves to indicate who they thought were the three members most influential in the final decision of their assembly. The great majority of respondents could and did name three persons, and a total of about thirty individuals were named by at least one respondent in each case, a reflection
Did the Participants Decide by Themselves?

of the widespread interaction that took place in these assemblies. The main question, however, is whether there was some common perception that a few individuals may have been particularly powerful.

The pattern differed across the assemblies. In British Columbia, one individual member was perceived to be one of the three most influential members by more than 80 per cent of the respondents, and in the Netherlands, two persons were named by about 60 per cent, while no one individual was selected by even half the respondents in Ontario. This suggests that we should be most concerned with the possibility of undue personal influence in British Columbia and least concerned in the case of the Ontario assembly. We supplemented these perceptions with our own close observations of the assemblies’ respective deliberative processes. All the evidence leads us to make the following observations about each case.

6.1.2 British Columbia

In the British Columbia assembly, three individuals may have exerted greater influence, though that influence does not seem to have overridden the collective debate. One person declared himself the voter choice spokesperson and kept raising its importance in plenary and small-group sessions as well as on the members’ website forum. But voter choice was deemed very important by the whole group from the very beginning (see Table 4.2), and so it is not clear that there was any personal influence there.

A second member appointed himself as an advocate for strong local representation. In formal meetings and social occasions, he kept the issue in the forefront of the members’ discussions and debates. This person may have played a critical role in the final discussions and decision.\(^2\) As we saw in Chapter 4, the late move to the single transferable vote (STV) was in part attributable to changing appreciations of how the different options implement local representation. That being said, local representation remained a weaker concern even at the end of the deliberative phase (Table 4.2), and so it is difficult to believe that this person altered the agenda in a significant way.

The third person who appears to have had some direct influence at a key decision point is the individual who was perceived by the great majority of members as the most influential. Widely perceived to be thoughtful and balanced, the individual spent much of the 2004 summer trying to assess the impact of adopting alternate mixed-member and STV electoral systems for the province. He produced a report, based on comparisons of aggregate election outcomes in each system as well as detailed computer simulations, which showed that there was not likely to be much difference in the proportionality either system would produce for the seventy-nine-seat legislature. The paper was widely circulated and increased his credibility, so that the members also came to regard him, by far, as the best

\(^2\) For a more thorough analysis of this individual’s role, see Lang (2008: 96–8).
informed of their colleagues. The impact of his work was to take proportionality out of the MMP–STV choice by rendering it neutral.

That this individual exerted some influence is undisputable, but it should not be overstated. He did not have a strong preference for STV. In fact, he liked mixed member proportional (MMP) almost as much as STV, both before and after the deliberative phase took place. Also, as we noted in Chapter 4, the late shift to STV in the wider assembly is only partly imputable to changes in the perceived relevance of the proportionality criterion to the MMP–STV choice.

In short, there is evidence that a few individuals played an important role in the British Columbia assembly and particularly during its deliberative period rebalancing of the relevant underlying considerations that lead to a late shift towards STV. Yet, clearly no one individual swayed the assembly in any particular direction.

6.1.3 The Netherlands

In the Dutch assembly, two persons were named by more than 60 per cent of the members, along with the assembly’s experts, as the most influential.3 The question is whether those two individuals may have led the whole group towards a specific choice.

The assembly’s most important decision was to keep the existing national open-list proportional representation (list-PR) system. From the start, however, there was a wide consensus that there was no need to overhaul the existing system; as many as 70 per cent of the participants indicated at the beginning that they were very or fairly satisfied with the Dutch voting system. There is no reason to believe that these two individuals played a major role in the decision to keep nationwide PR.

Perhaps the second most crucial decision concerned the support threshold parties ought to meet in order to win seats in parliament. The question was whether the threshold for party lists should be increased. The issue arose because, with an exceptionally low threshold, the existing Dutch PR system is one of the most proportional systems anywhere and typically returns about ten political parties to the Tweede Kamer (Lijphart 1994). By increasing the threshold, the degree of party fragmentation could be reduced. But that proposal did not get much support. The fact is that there was wide approval for strong proportionality from the beginning. Members expressed very little desire to adopt a higher threshold and thus no reason to suppose that any specific individual or small group may have been particularly influential on that issue.

While there is little evidence that the two identified leaders exercised much influence on those major issues, there was one other, relatively minor, decision on which one of the two individuals did make a difference. That was the decision to recommend moving from the D’Hondt to the Hare formula for distributing seats. Among the various proportional formulas, D’Hondt is generally considered to

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3 The Burgerforum’s expert team included Pien van den Eijden, Hans Klok, and Henk van der Kolk.
produce the least proportional and Hare the most proportional results (Lijphart 1994), though the differences tend to disappear in cases of large district magnitude such as the Netherlands. Still, the Dutch assembly’s proposal was to make their system even more proportional. This was a question about which one individual had strong views and about which most other members did not care much. That person did manage to impose his vision on the assembly. It should be pointed out, however, that this change would not have been very consequential, making an already very proportional electoral system only slightly more so.

6.1.4 Ontario

Influence within the Ontario assembly was perceived to have been most dispersed. Based on our close observation of the process, we would say that five or six individuals may have played a more active role and thus may have made a stronger contribution to the final decision. There is little doubt in our mind, however, that these leaders were not decisive in the decision to recommend MMP. In fact, support for MMP was weaker among those individuals than among the assembly as a whole, and some of these people were among the most articulate supporters of either the status quo or STV.

Several of these individuals were particularly influential, though, in some of the secondary decisions that were made. The Ontario assembly recommended increasing the size of the legislature. Some leaders were strong advocates of both sides of the issue, but one individual was particularly influential in making the case for augmenting the size of parliament. His influence was not necessarily personal, however, as support for an increased size came from members of visible minorities and women.

One person played a crucial role in the decision to revisit, and then reverse, an initial choice to allow ‘overhangs’. The question of providing overhang seats arises in a mixed-member system when a party wins more seats in the local constituencies than its share of the vote would otherwise entitle it to. In some places, such as Germany and New Zealand, the parties are allowed to keep the extra seats and the others are compensated by increasing the total number of seats in parliament. In other cases, such as Scotland, the total number of seats in the legislature is unaltered. The initial decision of the Ontario assembly was to permit such overhangs, with the prospect of an even larger legislature in some years. But one individual was able to convince the chair to intervene on a substantive issue, something the chair wanted to avoid. The chair agreed to have the assembly revisit this decision. The assembly chose the Scottish approach and recommended a system with no overhang. This was a clear case of strong personal influence, though on a matter of detail that was somewhat subsidiary to the assembly’s main agenda.

Thus, all the evidence at our disposal – the members’ perceptions tapped in our surveys and our own observations of the assemblies – indicates that no small group of individuals shaped the major recommendations: whether to keep national PR in
the Netherlands or to adopt STV in British Columbia or MMP in Ontario. In only one case, British Columbia, is there evidence that one particular individual may have been particularly influential, though that influence was confined to demonstrating that one of the criteria did not help members distinguish between two possible alternate electoral systems. In the other cases, some individual members were decisive, but only on certain secondary issues like the choice of the Hare formula in the Dutch case or the decision not to have overhangs in Ontario.

6.1.5 The influence of members with more education

The second possibility is that the better-educated members of the assemblies may have had a much greater say in the final decisions. It is fair to assume that the better educated generally tend to have better communication skills, and that they are somewhat more likely to intervene, especially in the plenary sessions. And indeed, among the three persons who were named as influential by a majority of the members across all assemblies, one had a doctorate from an elite research university.

The better educated may have been more vocal, and they may also have exercised greater personal influence. Still, they could have had little collective power if they were themselves divided on the issue. In order to conclude that the better educated as a group shaped the decisions that were made, we would need to show that they had some common views and that the less educated converged towards their common position.

There is simply no evidence of such a process going on. Table 6.1 shows the mean rating of the electoral system eventually chosen by each assembly provided by the better and lesser educated (the distinction hinging on the possession of a university education) at the beginning of the process. The ratings are remarkably similar. The same lack of significant difference existed throughout the proceedings. With no trace

| Table 6.1 Evaluations of the Electoral System Adapted by Level of Education |
|-------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                        | British Columbia (STV) | The Netherlands (open-list PR) | Ontario (MMP) |
| Without a university diploma | 5.0 (72) | 5.6 (43) | 5.8 (52) |
| With a university diploma   | 5.3 (52) | 5.6 (58) | 5.9 (40) |

Numbers are means of variables that range from 0 to 7. The number of cases is in parentheses. Measures were captured in the first wave of the panel.

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4 There is only one exception, the better educated being more favourable to STV in British Columbia in the middle period; the difference between the two groups was quite small, however.
of an educational cleavage at any point in time, we have no reason to believe that the better educated led their group in any particular direction.

6.2 THE ROLE OF EXPERTS

When they joined the citizen assemblies, most members knew almost nothing about electoral systems. They needed to learn about the variety of options available and about the various criteria by which the impact of different electoral mechanisms could or should be evaluated. This learning exercise was led by academic experts who introduced members to the classification of electoral systems and to the debates about the alleged strengths and weaknesses of different systems. That situation generated a considerable potential for the experts to exert substantial influence, for assembly members were heavily dependent on the educational programme and information the instructors provided. As ordinary citizens, comparatively ignorant of the fine details of electoral institutions, they were not in a position, at least at the beginning of the process, to challenge the observations and claims made by the experts.

At the same time, the potential for assembly teaching staff to dominate the members should not be overstated. Apart from the research directors managing the learning phases, there was a variety of other expert advice available. Members had David Farrell’s book and other supplementary materials, and there were many special presentations made by invited experts. So members were introduced to a variety of perspectives. Perhaps as important, the whole process was transparent and completely open as assembly sessions and materials were publicly available. Any expert presenting a view seen to be biased in any way could expect to be criticized. This strengthened the experts’ professional instincts to be neutral and objective.

There remains the possibility that the experts’ personal views affected, even unconsciously, their presentation of the material and options. The concern is not misplaced. A recent study has shown that deliberative outcomes are vulnerable to the influence of discussion leaders (Humphreys et al. 2006). A bold exercise in deliberative democracy (in Sao Tome and Principe) engaged individuals in 148 small groups to discuss topics related to the country’s economic priorities. These small groups were assigned a discussion leader at random. The evidence demonstrates that the leaders had a strong influence on the priorities that their group selected. Humphreys and colleagues conclude ‘the preferences recorded in the deliberative meetings to a large extent reflect the preferences of discussion leaders,

5 In the Ontario case, all plenary sessions and some small-group sessions were filmed by TVO, the provincial television network.
not participants’ (2006: 620). That finding is a useful reminder that we need to be sensitive to the potential power of those leading deliberation exercises. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the Sao Tome and Principe field experiment involved discussion leaders largely selected in a political process (Humphreys et al. 2006: 596–7). They were rather different from the independent academics who instructed the citizen assemblies. They could in no way be construed as experts.

So what can we say about the influence that the experts may have had on the decisions of the three electoral reform assemblies? The first piece of evidence comes from our surveys of the members. We asked them if they thought that the presentation of the options by the research staff was ‘very biased, somewhat biased, somewhat unbiased, or very unbiased’. The great majority of assembly members perceived the research staff to have been remarkably neutral. All in all, only 7 per cent of the participants in the Ontario assembly and only 12 per cent in the British Columbia assembly said that the presentation of the options was somewhat or very biased (this question was not posed in the Netherlands). When asked whether they thought the research staff had an electoral system preference, only a minority said yes (20 per cent in Ontario and the Netherlands, and 31 per cent in British Columbia). And among that minority, there was no consensus about the nature of the preference. In fact, quite a few commented that the research staff must have had an opinion, but that they did not know what it was.

Thus, if the experts had any influence, they did so without the members seeing it, and it must have been subtle and indirect. Is there any indication of such subtle influence? One way that the research staff could have exerted some influence is by defining the options among which the assembly would choose. This raises the question of which typology of electoral systems to use. In the British Columbia and Dutch cases, the materials of the learning phase presented a typology of five ‘families’ of electoral systems: plurality, majority, PR, STV, and mixed. This standard classification is the one utilized in the major textbook on electoral systems (Farrell 2001). In Ontario, the typology included only four distinct families, on the grounds that the STV should simply be characterized as a specific variety of PR, as noted by other classifications (Blais and Massicotte 2002; Reynolds et al. 2005). Is it possible that by presenting the choice as one between five rather than four types of systems, the research staff increased the possibility that the assemblies would recommend STV? There cannot be any definite answer to such a hypothetical question. But the available evidence suggests that this is unlikely. First, there is no evidence of a generalized bias in favour of STV across the three citizen assemblies. Second, the greater support for STV in British Columbia can be accounted for by the lesser importance attached to the criterion of simplicity and the more widespread anti-party sentiment (see Chapter 5).

Another way the experts could have shaped the participants’ choices is by defining the values and criteria by which the various electoral systems could or should be evaluated. The presentation of these criteria was remarkably similar in the three cases, but some slight differences are noteworthy. In the British Columbia case, the third
session of the very first weekend meeting was devoted to ‘assessing electoral systems’. The documentation referred to several impacts of electoral arrangements and grouped them under two headings: ‘on the system of government’ and ‘for voters’. In the Netherlands, the third weekend forum focused on eight distinctive consequences of electoral systems, two of them being the number of parties and the role/importance of parties. In Ontario, the research staff prepared, at the beginning of the deliberation phase, a package in which a list of possible objectives were identified, the very first one being that ‘our electoral system should produce a legislature with more women and other under-represented groups’. In short, the contrast between the government and voters may have been somewhat more emphasized in British Columbia, the Dutch research staff may have paid more attention to the role of parties, and the under-representation of women and minorities may have been slightly more highlighted in Ontario. We need to ascertain whether those different emphases might have influenced how assembly members thought about the issues.

Did the different assemblies choose different options because they had different objectives and values or was it because they were led to pay greater attention to different criteria by the research staff? Again, there cannot be any definitive verdict on this, but a useful way of addressing the issue is to determine whether there is evidence of substantial value differences among the three assemblies before they started working (and thus before the research staff could exert any influence) and/or whether there is any evidence that the research staff may have primed certain considerations at the expense of others.

First, could it be that the (apparently) more explicit contrast made by the British Columbia staff between voters and governments primed voter choice as a criterion, and facilitated the choice of STV? There seems to be little support for that hypothesis. Populist sentiment was stronger from the start in British Columbia, though our surveys suggest that the differences were quite modest. As many as 61 per cent of the British Columbia assembly members agreed with the statement that ‘we would probably solve most of our big problems if decisions could be brought back to the people at the grass roots’, but the proportions were only slightly lower in the Netherlands (57 per cent) and Ontario (53 per cent). Furthermore, and most importantly, the correlation between populist sentiment and evaluations of STV as final decisions were made was basically nil (0.06) in British Columbia (as in the other two assemblies). There is thus no evidence that populist feelings were primed in British Columbia. Likewise, there is no indication that voter choice mattered more there than in the other two cases.

The second question that we address is whether the (apparently) stronger emphasis given to parties in the Netherlands programme may have led members of the Dutch assembly to focus more on that dimension and therefore to become more favourable to a list-PR system. This appears very unlikely. On one hand, as we have seen, a strong majority of the Dutch participants expressed their satisfaction with the existing (open-list PR) system at the very beginning of the process, before hearing the assembly’s experts. Also, as many as 89 per cent of the Dutch
members believed, from the time they first met, that ‘without political parties there can’t be true democracy’, a considerably larger proportion than in either British Columbia (61 per cent) or Ontario (73 per cent). They were clearly concerned with parties from the beginning. Moreover, the link between this opinion and ratings of list-PR did not increase in strength during the proceedings – the correlation remained nil throughout (0.02 after the assembly).

Finally, another possibility is that the decision by the Ontario research staff to put the question of women and minorities’ representation on the top of the list of ‘possible objectives’ induced the Ontario members to pay more attention to that particular aspect, and that this may have indirectly helped MMP. There were initially few differences between the three assemblies in the overall distribution of views about women and minorities. The percentage agreeing with the statement that the best way to protect women’s interests is to have more women in legislatures is almost identical in Ontario (68 per cent) and British Columbia (67 per cent), though somewhat smaller in the Netherlands (53 per cent). Those expressing support for the view that better representation of minorities is needed in legislatures constituted 47 per cent of the Ontario, 49 per cent of the British Columbia, and 45 per cent of the Dutch memberships. The key issue, then, is whether this question might have been primed in Ontario. To check that possibility, we examined the correlation between these views and ratings of MMP among Ontarians. The relationship stayed non-existent (ending up at 0.01). There is thus no evidence that concerns about women and minority representation levels were primed by the Ontario research staff.

Ascertaining the actual influence of experts in a deliberative assembly is a challenging task. In this instance, the task is aggravated by the fact that many of us were ourselves directly involved in steering the process of learning and deliberation. Since the participants initially knew basically nothing about electoral systems and that they had to quickly acquire the necessary information and tools, we recognize that there was a real prospect for influence from the ‘teachers’. It is hard to believe that the experts had no influence at all, direct or indirect, on any of the issues that were considered. The fundamental question, however, is whether the experts had a substantial impact on the most crucial decision, that is, the choice of the electoral system. The evidence that we have been able to assemble suggests that answer is no. The members themselves perceived the research staff to have been neutral. Each staff had a distinctive programme outlining the relevant considerations and criteria, but we have seen no indication of priming effects in the assemblies.

6.3 THE CHAIRS

The experts were not the only actors who could influence the decisions reached by the citizen assemblies. We also need to examine the role played by the externally
appointed chairs who were in charge of the process, could decide how much time to devote to various issues, and shape the assemblies’ individual decision trees. Their potential for influence was real, and this raises a series of important questions: How did the three chairs conceive of their role? What were their objectives? Did they have any views of their own about electoral systems? Did they have clear conceptions about the process, about how the assembly should reach its decisions? Is there any reason to believe that they had an effect on the final choices that were made?

The chair of the British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly was Jack Blaney.6 He made it very clear from the beginning that he was not an expert on electoral systems and that his goal was to make sure the process was unbiased and fully inclusive. He was very much the leader of the assembly, opening each session with the reminder that ‘nothing is decided until everything is decided’, so that members should feel free to continue discussing and debating all subjects. Blaney’s primary concern was to ensure members established a healthy working environment and he devoted much of his energy towards this. He would constantly ‘work the room’, talking with people at mealtimes and session breaks, as well as between formal assembly meetings, to see how things were going. He identified individuals who seemed to have the pulse of their colleagues and sought as much feedback from them as possible.

In the actual conduct of the plenary sessions, Blaney’s approach could be described as liberal. He preferred to let members talk as much as they wished, even if this meant going over time, until his sense was that most members wanted to move on, and he would then check if that was indeed the feeling of the group. As chair, Blaney was particularly keen to avoid formal votes until the end of the decision-making process. He wanted to keep good spirit in the assembly and hoped that this would make it easier to reach final decisions. Although he never publicly said so, his worst-case scenario would have been an assembly equally and deeply divided between two options. In the face of that outcome, he probably would have called for more deliberation in the hope of forging a consensus. From that perspective, Blaney was quite successful, since a strong majority supported the recommendation in favour of STV.

It is hard to believe that the chair of the British Columbia citizen assembly had any direct impact on the final electoral system choice. Perhaps his most important decision was to create a deliberation and decision structure that postponed votes until late in the process. This decision kept the assembly united and working forward, and it may have contributed to the near unanimity of the final recommendation, as some indifferent and ambivalent members (between STV and MMP) expressed the view that it was important that the assembly speak with one voice. That outcome might not have been possible if members had been put in

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6 For more on the assembly chairs, see Chapter 2 (Section 2.3.1).
the position of expressing their preferences at an early stage of the deliberative debate. Also, Blaney did interpret the assembly’s mandate as requiring it to work with the current size of the legislature, and Lang (2008) has raised the possibility that this decision could have advantaged STV, since MMP’s might be less attractive to some in a context where local electoral districts grow significantly in size.

The chair of the Dutch assembly, Jacobine Geel, did not have a clear preference for any specific electoral system. In this case as well, we can rule out the possibility of any conscious attempt to influence the outcome of the assembly. Geel’s main responsibility was to moderate the plenary sessions, and help to strengthen and maintain the integrity of the process. She was also process oriented. There were, however, some differences in the way Jack Blaney and Jacobine Geel led their groups. Geel appeared more interested in the content of the proposal; she did not prefer any specific option, but she was openly concerned that the Burger-forum recommendation be ‘workable’ and ‘consistent’. It was pretty clear, for instance, that she did not like the idea that coalition voting should be studied further. Some members wanted the ballot to offer a vote for a party and a vote for a coalition. This issue was the subject of a vote in the assembly, where sixty-five against sixty-three decided to end discussions about coalition voting. Since some members present did not vote, others were absent that weekend, and the margin was so narrow, certain members asked for a second more formal vote, but Geel refused. Because she agreed to a second vote on another issue later in the process, this refusal suggests the Dutch chair was not interested in coalition voting, which would not be simple to implement in the electoral system. Geel also sometimes expressed the opinion that the forum should recommend some change, even though she would quickly add that a recommendation to keep the existing system would be equally good. She may thus have encouraged the push for recommending a strengthened personal vote element, though support for such change was already relatively widespread among assembly members.

Another difference in the way the British Columbia and Dutch assemblies functioned was the much greater frequency of voting and the greater number of alternatives explicitly considered (seven altogether) in the latter case. The Burger-forum’s deliberative process was less structured, with no focusing on a limited number of options, and less concerned for building a consensus – a surprise in this quintessential consociational democracy. Issues were to be resolved by voting under an absolute majority rule. These differences in the style of leadership may have affected things at the margin. But, here again, we fail to see how the chair may have even inadvertently influenced the decision to recommend keeping the list system of national PR.

The approach followed by the chair of the Ontario assembly, George Thomson, resembled in many ways the one adopted by Jack Blaney in British Columbia. Great emphasis was given to building strong and positive relationships within the group. This began prior to the assembly’s first meeting, as Thomson called each
member to discuss what concerns they might have. He was keen to make sure that members felt good about the process and trusted their colleagues. At the same time, he made it very clear that his role was not to get involved in the substance of the matter, and he was quite consistent in this, the only significant exception being his decision to have the assembly revisit the issue of overhang seats.

Thomson decided early on that, unless specifically asked for by members, the assembly would not take a vote on routine matters. Instead, consensus – expressed by a simple show of hands – was adopted as the working decision rule. This reflected the modus operandi of the entire assembly process; unless there was broad agreement, decisions should not be taken.

In all three assemblies, the chair saw his/her role as orchestrating the process. In all cases, they had no clear substantive preferences and so no particular agenda to pursue. Their styles did vary and we cannot dismiss the possibility that some of their decisions may have had some indirect influence on marginal issues. Still, the conclusion seems inescapable that the chairs did not decisively affect the choice of the electoral system.

6.4 THE PUBLIC CONSULTATIONS

In each of the three assemblies, a series of public consultations took place after the learning stage, before the process of deliberation and decision-making started. This consultation phase was meant to inform members about how the public felt about the issue. Was the electorate satisfied or dissatisfied with the existing system? How much appetite was there for reform? What were the major concerns, perceptions, and values at stake? Which potential reform options had greater or weaker support? The question here is whether this public input had any significant impact on the assemblies’ recommendations. Our analyses indicate that the consultations did influence the members but did not substantially affect the final outcomes. The most telling sign here is simply the absence of evidence that mean evaluations of the various options changed during the consultations. The most important effect of the consultation exercises was indirect; they strengthened members’ confidence that they could meet the expectations vested in them.

British Columbia held the most extensive consultations. They offered assembly members the opportunity to travel, in small groups, to different communities across the province. This sensitized many of them to the vast size of the province and to the representational challenges of rural areas. Perhaps this made them more responsive to the arguments about local representation made by members from those areas. The members learned that most citizens knew far less about electoral systems than they did, and that the great majority they heard from wanted change and some form of proportionality. They also heard many individuals praising the
government for setting up the assembly. All this strengthened their sense of legitimacy and competence. The members could also see that there was a concerted attempt by the Green Party and Fair Vote BC (an electoral reform lobby group) to push for the adoption of an MMP system. That campaign was perceived by many to be illegitimate: members believed that the consultative exercise was meant to inform them about the public mood rather than about the views of specific interest groups.

The consultative process in the Netherlands was quite different. Meetings with the public were structured as debates organized around specific questions and propositions, and those attending were invited to cast votes on each of them. The idea was to gauge public reactions to general ideas formulated by the Burger-forum, rather than allow the participants to propose explicit options for electoral reform. These meetings were evaluated positively by the assembly members (see Table 2.5), but the consultations did not change their opinions nor did they give them many new arguments. Most felt that those who came were not a representative sample of the population and were not well informed. All in all, then, the Dutch public consultations did not have a major impact.

The Ontario consultative process was similar to the one in British Columbia, though slightly less extensive. As in British Columbia, the main impact was mainly a legitimating one. For most members, it was the first time their work had been recognized and this recognition was empowering. The consultations provided legitimacy not only to the assembly as a whole but also to the positions of members who had aligned themselves with one of the various options. Members rarely heard anything new, but they could later utilize what they heard to support their own positions and to challenge the thinking of other members. Finally, the meetings confirmed that there was appetite for change and broad support for a mixed system.

In short, members in each of the assemblies quickly realized from their experiences in the consultation phase that they knew more about the details and consequences of electoral systems than did the public and that, in British Columbia and Ontario, there was some interest in changing the system. If the consultations had very little impact on the final decisions made, they did provide members with confidence that they were on the right track.

6.5 THE POLITICAL PARTIES

The decision that the assemblies were asked to make was bound to have very direct and substantial consequences for the political parties and the system of party competition in their respective political systems. Most obviously, any proposal to move to a more (or less) proportional system would necessarily benefit small (or large) parties.
From a rational choice perspective, we would expect parties to support the electoral system that maximized their seat share and/or their chances of being in government (Benoît 2004). Presumably, the parties have compelling incentives to try to convince the respective assemblies that the option that benefited them was the best one for the community.

However, this perspective must be nuanced. Bowler et al.’s survey of candidates and parliamentarians in four countries reveals that their views about electoral institutions are shaped by their values and ideologies as well as by electoral self-interest (2005). As they conclude, pure self-interest is an incomplete explanation for politicians’ attitudes towards institutions such as the electoral system. Pilet’s detailed analysis of Belgian political parties’ positions with respect to three electoral reform proposals also demonstrates that ideas matter, and that parties do not always take the time to think through where their immediate electoral interest lies (2007).

In spite of this, there is little doubt that parties have powerful stakes to protect or to advance on electoral system issues. It is quite clear, for instance, that the principal reason why the single member plurality (SMP) system remains in place in Britain, Canada, and the United States, despite all its shortcomings, is that the major parties have an advantage to keep it (Blais and Shugart 2008). The large parties have a strong interest in maintaining the status quo and this generally goes a long way to explain their behaviour.

From this point of view, one of the most startling features of the events surrounding the three assemblies is that virtually all the parties chose to remain completely silent. This is truly puzzling. It is equivalent to a medical association declining to speak to a commission mandated to propose a system for compensating physicians. Whatever the assemblies proposed could have had huge consequences for the political fate of the parties. How can we explain their decision not to take a position?

In British Columbia, the governing Liberals created the assembly after promising to do so in the manifesto for their successful 2001 election campaign. At the time they launched the assembly (i.e. before its participants had even been selected), the Liberals indicated that they would not make any proposal to the assembly, and they did not. Their rationale was that it was the preserve of citizens to decide which democratic system they wanted, and that it was crucial to maintain distance between the assembly and the government.

The opposition New Democratic Party (NDP) was devastated by the 2001 provincial election in which it won only two seats in the legislature. All its available energy was spent on rebuilding a badly shattered party, and few in the party paid attention to the assembly as it was being set up and started. As a relatively minor party in federal politics, the national NDP has long believed in and campaigned for PR, but the provincial party had a very different perspective. As a major player in the provincial system, it could expect to win office on its own with an SMP electoral system, as it had done in the past. If the provincial party
leaders had an incentive to oppose a shift to some form of PR, many of its ordinary individual members strongly believed in it as a matter of principle, and this created the potential for deep internal division at a time when the party was in no condition to manage it. With the Liberals committed to remaining on the sideline, the NDP might also have been accused of undermining the political independence of the assembly process if they had intervened. Clearly, abstaining from the debate was the easiest and safest option.

The only other significant party was the Greens, traditionally a minor player in British Columbia politics, but which had gained some visibility after winning 12 per cent of the vote, but no seats, in 2001. It was a strong advocate of an MMP system, and the party leader Adriane Carr, who had been encouraged by Green success in New Zealand after it adopted MMP in the 1990s, was deeply committed to electoral reform. She made a point of coming to every session of the assembly, sitting prominently in the front row of the public gallery. The party actively campaigned throughout the process in favour of MMP, producing a good deal of written material for the assembly members and appearing at several public hearings.

In British Columbia, then, the two major parties were completely absent from the whole process. Once they had agreed to the principle of citizen decision-making through an assembly and subsequent public referendum, any intervention on their part could have been perceived, or portrayed, as illegitimate.

In the Netherlands, the parties were even more absent from the scene than in British Columbia. The decision to have a citizen assembly was a concession that a minor party (Democrats 66 – D66) extracted from its larger partners as part of the price for its participation in the coalition government. But none of the other parties expressed any interest or concern for the assembly or its work. No party, except D66, had taken any position on the issue of electoral reform in the previous elections, none paid any attention to the assembly, and none presented a brief to the Burgerforum.

In short, the assembly was basically a non-event for the Dutch parties, with the notable exception of D66. Because D66 was a pivotal member of the coalition, the other members of the government felt forced to make some accommodation to its priorities, but clearly they considered it only a symbolic gesture. The electoral system was not on any of the major parties’ agenda, so they did not take the assembly seriously.

In Ontario, as in British Columbia, the citizen assembly was the result of a series of initiatives on democratic renewal implemented by a newly elected Liberal government after having promised them during the 2003 election campaign. Like in British Columbia, premier McGuinty guaranteed complete independence for the assembly, and his party remained completely silent on the question of electoral reform as it worked. The official opposition Conservative party also had little to say. On the few occasions that its leader John Tory was asked about the assembly, he ducked the issue and simply replied that it was up to the public to decide the wisdom of the recommendation. The province’s third party, the
New Democrats, took a different stance. Its leader Howard Hampton was an enthusiastic supporter of electoral reform. However, the party accepted the apparent norm of non-intervention and did not present a brief to the assembly in the consultation phase.

In short, almost all the parties in each of the cases refrained from taking a position on a vital issue capable of altering their place in the political system. They did so either because they assumed nothing could come out of the exercise (in the Netherlands), or because they feared any partisan intervention would be deemed to be illegitimate after having agreed to allow ordinary citizens to take ownership of the issue. The surreal outcome was that the actors most likely to be directly affected by a change in the electoral system chose to remain on the sidelines.

6.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have explored the possibility that assembly members’ decisions reflected more than their own values, criteria, or priorities, by having been prejudiced by external forces. We focused on potential influences from leaders within the assembly, experts in charge of informing them, chairs directing the process, the general public through the consultative stage, and the political parties.

With respect to the political parties, our findings are absolutely unequivocal. The parties were strikingly absent from the whole process. This itself raises important questions about the consequences of such a situation. The risk, of course, is that assembly members may not have fully appreciated the problems and opportunities that parties face under different electoral systems.

With respect to opinion leadership within the assemblies, our findings are also pretty clear. There were strong interactions among assembly members, and there was ample opportunity for mutual influence. But all the evidence at our disposal suggests that leadership was widely dispersed. Only in the British Columbia case is there some indication that one particular individual may have played a particularly important part, and then only with respect to one specific dimension of the debate. We can conclude with some confidence that no one person or small group of individuals within the assemblies shaped their final recommendations.

Our conclusions about the role of the chairs are unambiguous as well. The chairs were entirely focused on creating good working relationships within the memberships and making sure that the process was as fair and transparent as possible. They did not have clear personal preferences about electoral systems and they did not have any impact on the content of the decisions.

The same verdict applies to public consultations. They were very helpful in strengthening assembly participants’ confidence in their capacity to do the job, but members learned very little from them.
The more difficult question concerns the role of experts, a particularly thorny issue since we, the authors, were among the key members of this group. We are conscious of the fact that we may be prone to downplay the role that we might have played in the process. But again the evidence indicates that the electoral system experts did not define the agenda or govern the choices. Perhaps the most telling fact is that there was initial widespread dissatisfaction with the existing system in Ontario and British Columbia and relatively little in the Netherlands. It was these sentiments which drove the push for reform in the former and the commitment to the status quo in the latter. The most plausible interpretation, it seems to us, is the one advanced in Chapter 5: the specific choice made by each assembly reflected its own particular set of priorities. Different assemblies recommended different electoral systems because their members valued different objectives.
Did Participants Become Better Citizens?

You see this creature with her kerbstone English: the English that will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days. Well, sir, in three months I could pass that girl off as a duchess at an ambassador’s garden party.

Henry Higgins, in *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw (1913)

The three citizen assemblies provided their members with a unique and unexpected experience. They shared numerous private and public learning and deliberative sessions with people they had never met before, and worked to develop a report which they knew would be widely and critically assessed. Being immersed in an intense political process with the potential to change the functioning of democracy in their province/country was not something easily forgotten. For some individuals, this might have been life changing, for others a source of frustration or disappointment. But none was likely to be unmarked by the opportunity and experience.

Political theorists concerned with issues of public participation and impacts of deliberative democracy claim, just like Henry Higgins, that both can produce ‘better’ citizens. This assertion can be traced through the works of Aristotle, John Stuart Mill, and Alexis de Tocqueville, with modern versions normally attributed to Arnold Kaufman, Carole Pateman, and Dennis Thompson. Pateman suggests that ‘the theory of participatory democracy argues that the experience of participation in some ways leaves the individual better equipped to undertake further participation in the future’ (1970: 45). Thompson thinks that participation could ‘develop social virtues, such as a sense of cooperation and community’, arguing that it increases citizens’ political competence and system approval, as well as promotes self-realization including political efficacy (1970: 66). The claim that participation produces better citizens can also be found among recent advocates of deliberative democracy (Gastil 2000; Morrell 2005).

In early work, Pateman and Thompson rooted their assertions in the empirical work of the *Civic Culture*. Almond and Verba had reported the existence of strong relationships between psychological factors like political alienation and levels of political participation (1989: 46). However, these and similar studies only showed correlations between participation and various attitudes, they did not establish a causal connection. Indeed, many scholars interpreted the observed associations the other way around, hypothesizing that it was attitudes like political interest and efficacy that produced or stimulated political participation. This led some researchers to conclude that the empirical investigations used to support the claims
of citizenship theorists and participatory democrats could neither prove nor disprove a thesis about the transformational effects of participation (Delli Carpini et al. 2004: 321; Gastil et al. 2008: 351).

While the number of studies explicitly addressing the causal connection from participation to attitudes is still small, some have examined the issue (Finkel 1985, 1987; Leighley 1991; Radcliff & Wingenbach 2000; Mutz 2006). For instance, Steven Finkel analysed the effects of various types of participation on different political attitudes using survey panel data, with mixed results. He found that voting did not have a significant impact on political efficacy, but campaigning did; voting improved regime support, but protesting and aggressive political behaviour did not. Although simple participatory acts like voting, demonstrating, or signing a petition do not seem to be very influential in changing attitudes, Mansbridge suggests that we might expect larger consequences from more demanding activities (1999: 317).

Nevertheless, empirical investigations of the effects of deliberation and other challenging activities on various civic attitudes have also produced largely weak and mixed results. They support the idea that participants in a deliberative setting acquire context-specific efficacy (the feeling that they can influence the outcomes of the process in question), but disagree on whether there is an effect on more generalized efficacy (Gastil and Dillard 1999; Barabas 2004; Carpini et al. 2004). While Morrell (2005) says there is no significant impact, Fishkin and Luskin are more positive. They claim their deliberative poll evidence shows that ‘the more citizens deliberate, the more informed, interested, participatory, efficacious, trusting, supportive of democracy, and sociotropic they become’ (Fishkin and Luskin 1999: 33; Luskin and Fishkin 2002). For their part, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse are far less optimistic about such processes. They conclude that the positive effects of participation are predominantly limited to situations where people already agree about the topics they discuss. In real politics – where people disagree, where there are distributional problems, and where individuals have to make collective decisions – participation, and especially deliberation, may even have negative effects: ‘given the predilections of the people, real deliberation is quite likely to make them hopping mad’ (2002: 207).

These conflicting theoretical claims and empirical observations give us good reason to investigate the actual civic effects of citizen assemblies. If we are able to show that the assembly experiences had a considerable impact on the participants, this will strengthen the case of the deliberative democracy advocates. If, on the other hand, we see no impact on attitudes as a consequence of involvement in this most intense form of participation, we will have to be dubious about claims that participation improves citizenship.

7.1 EXPECTATIONS OF CHANGE

To this point, our consideration of the attitudes that political theorists expect to be stimulated by political participation has been cast in general terms. We need to ask
what are the expected beneficial effects. Thompson includes: political awareness, knowledge and competence, approval of the political system, efficacy, cooperation, and community (1970: 60–7). Mansbridge mentions four: political efficacy, sense of cooperation, commitment to collective decisions, and democratic character (1999: 314). ¹ In this chapter, our analysis is limited to a number of measurable attitudes. We focus on political engagement, political efficacy, opinions towards various political actors and democracy, civic duty, interpersonal trust, populism, and open-mindedness.

Although we start by examining the relationship between participation and attitude change, we also want to enquire into the origins of any such changes.² What may be the psychological or social mechanisms generating these effects? While the underlying mechanism may, of course, vary from one effect to another, we anticipate that two key factors explain the acquisition of these attitudes and the differences in the extent to which the assembly participants acquired them. First, members who became heavily involved in the assembly process ought to have changed more than those who attended but were not very active. This is merely an extension of the general expectation that participation makes better citizens – more participation should make them even better. Second, we expect that there was a difference in the acquisition of attitudes between the learning phase and the deliberation phase. On the one hand, if it is indeed deliberative work (discussion, debate, and decision-making) that produces attitude change, then the biggest changes ought to have occurred in the latter part of the assembly proceedings. On the other hand, if it is the learning and social interaction aspects of participation that are mainly responsible for producing attitude movement, then the biggest changes will have been observed in the early stages of the process. With data collected over the life of the assemblies, we are able to compare these two periods and estimate their relative importance in inducing change. As well, we will search for additional explanations in the context of specific attitudes.

7.2 DID ASSEMBLY MEMBERS BECOME MORE POLITICALLY ENGAGED?

In Chapter 3, we saw that the assembly members were typically more interested in politics than the general public at the outset. In order to discover whether members became even more engaged during the process, we look at changes in four measures: subjective political interest (‘how interested in politics do you feel?’), political

¹ See Luskin and Fishkin for a list with nine items (2002: 3). Carpini et al. summarize the long list of expectations of deliberative democracy (2004: 320–1).
² See, for example, Barabas who argued that: ‘scholars have not clarified how deliberation works’ (2004: 687).
attention (‘how much attention do you usually pay to news about politics?’, ‘how often do you read national news in the newspaper?’), and subjective political information (‘how informed about politics do you feel?’). These questions were asked before the first meeting of the assembly, then halfway through the process, and finally after the assemblies completed their work and delivered their reports.

Table 7.1 presents the members’ initial average scores on these engagement attitudes and reports the change recorded at the end. The data for all three assemblies were pooled together. All variables have been transformed to a 0–100 scale to simplify comparison. Their direction has also been recoded so that a high value indicates a positive attitude and an increase is the change expected as a consequence of participation. The significance of the differences between T1 and T3 was identified by a (two-sided) t-test.

The evidence makes it clear that subjective political interest, attention, and information all increased substantially and significantly over the life of the assemblies. The participants report paying more attention to the news, becoming more interested in, and feeling more informed about politics at the end of the process than they did at the beginning. Similar changes occurred in all three assemblies. Since the members’ initial scores on these attitudes were rather skewed towards the high end, a ceiling effect could be limiting the increases. Indeed, the climb in political interest was much greater among those whose starting levels were relatively low. This logic also accounts for a greater increase of interest among women for, as is the case in the wider population (Verba et al. 1997), their initial interest levels were lower than were those of the men. Once we control for ceiling effects, the gap between the two genders disappears.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political interest</th>
<th>Start</th>
<th>Change</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attention to political news</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>+7.8**</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention to domestic news</td>
<td>74.1</td>
<td>+6.5**</td>
<td>317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informed about politics</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>+10.6**</td>
<td>107n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60.4</td>
<td>+11.9**</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All variables range from 0 to 100. n = The Netherlands only.

** Significant at 0.05; *significant at 0.10.

3 Some questions were only asked in the Canadian provinces, some were only asked in the Netherlands, as indicated in the column for the number of cases.

4 If the coding is reversed (as compared to the question wording), this is indicated with an ‘(r)’ in the first column of Table 7.1. Details about the variables can be found in Appendix 3.

5 In order to control for ceiling (and floor) effects in this chapter’s analyses, individual change was taken as the dependent variable and the initial level of that variable was inserted as an independent variable.
Did Participants Become Better Citizens?

To determine whether those with the largest involvement in the assembly experienced the greatest attitudinal shifts, we constructed a measure of involvement based on various assembly activities including visits to the intranet discussion forum, reading the assembly’s newsletter, and attendance at consultation meetings. Given the differences in the activities across the three assemblies, we examined each separately. In most cases, differences in the level of involvement do not explain changes in political engagement. The effect of involvement was always positive, but significantly so in only a few instances: political interest and attention in British Columbia, and political information in Ontario.

If the intensity of members’ involvement does not systematically account for these differences, it is possible that they were driven by the nature of assembly activity. To consider that possibility, we ask if change occurred during the learning or deliberation phases. The story is ambiguous. The timing of the increase in the attitudes was not the same in all three cases. In British Columbia, the earlier information period clearly led to a larger gain in political interest than the later decision-making stage. But that was not the case in either the Netherlands or Ontario, where the increases seem to have been more gradual, developing over time. This suggests that political interest may have been stimulated in different ways in the different assemblies.

Assembly members did become more politically interested, attentive, and informed than they were at the beginning. They came to appreciate politics even more during the process. However, we are unable to shed much light on how that happened and thus on the precise mechanism that links cause and effect. Involvement played a small role, but the relationship is a very weak one. It is important to note that our data cannot tell us whether these attitude changes were permanent, altering the assembly members’ engagement over the longer term, or whether participants, no longer in the grip of the intense learning and deliberative environment, have reverted to their original engagement levels.

7.3 DID ASSEMBLY MEMBERS BECOME MORE SELF-CONFIDENT?

We have three indicators of assembly participants’ self-confidence: whether they feel nervous speaking in front of a group, whether they consider themselves a shy person, and whether they think they are able to do things as well as other people. In addition, the members of the Dutch assembly were asked a political efficacy question: whether they thought themselves qualified to play an active role in politics. The results, reported in Table 7.2, indicate that assembly members did not emerge from the proceedings feeling more self-confident. The level of nervousness associated with public speaking was unchanged. Political efficacy also
remained static in the Netherlands. The other two items did move significantly, but in a direction that runs contrary to theoretical anticipations. Apparently, participants were shier and less confident about their capacities at the end of the assembly’s work. It is unclear to us why this happened.

Aggregate dynamics could mask marked individual differences. For instance, the level of involvement could have fostered positive individual changes in self-confidence. But it did not; assembly involvement was not systematically related to these changes. Another potential mediator is the nature of the experience that each person actually had within the assemblies. More specifically, the beneficial consequences of deliberation could be contingent upon the feeling of having been taken seriously by colleagues. Dutch members were explicitly asked whether other assembly members listened carefully to what they had to say, and whether their political opinions were similar to those of the whole group.

There was no significant difference in self-confidence between those who considered that their remarks were respected and those who did not. However, being part of the majority or the minority did matter. The data reveal that those whose opinions deviated from the rest of the assembly became somewhat more positive about their ability ‘to play an active role in politics’, while those who shared the opinions of the majority came to consider themselves relatively less capable of playing such a role. The difference was small, but it was significant. These results imply that individuals who face widespread disagreement become more efficacious, perhaps because they needed to battle firmly to keep their ground, while those unchallenged by holding dominant views do not develop any increased appreciation of their ability to become active participants.

Nonetheless, the principal conclusion is that most assembly members did not gain in self-confidence and political efficacy. Only the few people with minority opinions seem to have become a bit more efficacious, suggesting that participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7.2 Changing Attitudes: Self-Confidence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I feel nervous when I speak in front of a group (r)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In general, I am a shy person (r)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am not able to do things as well as most other people (r)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am well qualified to play an active role in politics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All variables range from 0 to 100. c = Canada only; n = the Netherlands only.

** Significant at 0.05;
* significant at 0.10.

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6 The number of Dutch respondents indicating they do not know the answer to this question is substantial. This number does not change substantially between the first and the final surveys.

7 The percentage with negative perceptions was small in both cases (12–13 per cent).
can stimulate efficacy in instances where individuals are pushed to fight for unpopular views.

7.4 DID ASSEMBLY MEMBERS BECOME MORE POSITIVE ABOUT POLITICS?

Learning to realize the constraints within which individual politicians, political parties, and the government operate, and having an impact on governmental decision-making are generally expected to generate more positive views towards politics (Finkel 1985: 893). Therefore, the information about politics that assembly members acquired ought to have improved their attitudes about political actors. Our data, presented in Table 7.3, show that this was not systematically the case. First, with regard to politicians, the results were mixed. Six of the seven indicators showed a small positive gain, though only half of them were statistically significant. Furthermore, those significant changes did not occur in each assembly. For instance, there actually seems to have been a decline in attitudes about politicians among British Columbians, while there was an increase in Ontario.\(^8\)

Thus, any claim that participation improves citizens’ attitudes towards the political class is, at best, only modestly substantiated by the data.

With regard to political parties, the findings were again equivocal. There were small positive movements in the beliefs that parties do a good job of presenting clear choices, finding solutions, and expressing people’s concerns. But the proportion that accepted the proposition that parties are essential for democracy actually fell a little. Once more, there was some variation in attitude shifts across the three assemblies, with changes in line with expectations being strongest in the Netherlands and Ontario, and weakest in British Columbia.

Views about government also progressed to some limited extent within the assemblies. The idea that the government cares much about what ordinary people think grew significantly among members, particularly in the Netherlands and Ontario.

The most surprising result is the small decline in satisfaction with democracy. Although it increased in the Netherlands, satisfaction deteriorated in both British Columbia and Ontario. These unexpected drops should not be underestimated. Over 30 per cent of Canadian assembly members reported lower evaluations of the democratic system at the end of the proceedings. Part of the explanation for this change may be found in the similar decline of satisfaction with the current

\(^8\) Interestingly, Ontario was the only assembly where a group of former politicians made a presentation during the learning phase.
electoral system (see the discussion in Chapter 4). Over time, approval of the existing voting systems decreased substantially in Canada while soaring in the Netherlands. The striking parallels in those two patterns suggest that individuals discussing the best way to organize elections may simply come to conceptualize democracy in terms of its specific electoral regime.

Is it actually involvement in the assemblies and, more particularly, the amount of information about politics acquired by the participants that foster positive attitudes towards politics? In order to test this idea, we examined whether attitude change was more pronounced among those who learned more and those who were more involved in the assembly process. These two potential mediators were introduced in Section 7.2. It appears that increased subjective knowledge made a difference, albeit a weak one, for attitudes towards politicians, but not for views about government, democracy, or parties. Those whose reported knowledge of politics improved during the assembly process became slightly more positive towards politicians. By contrast, the level of assembly involvement was inconsequential, it was not related to changes in the attitudes towards any of the four political targets.

| Table 7.3 Changing Attitudes: Opinions about Politics |
|---------------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Start | Change | N |
| Politicians |
| Those elected soon lose touch with the people (r) | 40.0 | −1.0 | 292 |
| Politicians are ready to lie to get elected (r) | 41.3 | +2.7 | 271 |
| Politicians are about as honest as the average person | 30.4 | +6.9** | 313 |
| MPs do not care about opinions of people like me (r) | 46.4 | +7.2** | 83 |
| Elected officials are unselfish | 48.6 | +1.2 | 311 |
| Elected officials are intelligent | 67.4 | +2.8** | 317 |
| Elected officials are informed | 70.0 | +1.4 | 315 |
| Political Parties |
| Parties are necessary for democracy | 69.6 | −6.0** | 288 |
| Parties do a good job in presenting clear choices on the issues | 44.3 | +4.4** | 315 |
| Parties do a good job in finding solutions to import. problems | 42.6 | +4.9** | 315 |
| Parties do a good job in expressing the concerns of the people | 39.0 | +3.8** | 315 |
| All parties are basically the same (r) | 70.9 | −0.3 | 308 |
| Government |
| Government does not care what people like me think (r) | 49.7 | +5.1** | 301 |
| Political System |
| Satisfaction with the way democracy works | 56.5 | −2.5* | 317 |

All variables range from 0 to 100. n = The Netherlands only. 
** Significant at 0.05; 
* significant at 0.10.
Did Participants Become Better Citizens?

All in all, assembly members became somewhat more positive towards politicians, political parties, and the government, but not towards democracy. However, the changes were small, not consistent across all indicators, and not evident in all three assemblies.

7.5 DID ASSEMBLY MEMBERS BECOME MORE CIVIC-MINDED?

According to some democratic theorists, being involved in politics may also improve one’s general civic attitudes and values. It is argued, for example, that participation leads to higher levels of interpersonal trust (Brehm and Rahn 1997) and tolerance (Carpini et al. 2004). In Table 7.4, we measure the change on a number of such variables over the assembly process. The first block speaks to members’ sense of civic duty and interpersonal trust. Duty to stay informed and to turn out for elections exhibited a very small but significant increase. One of the two conventional trust indicators improved a bit, though not significantly. For such an intensive deliberative experience, this movement appears minuscule.

Participants appear to have become somewhat more positive about other citizens. There were significant, though not substantial, increases on opinions about people’s unselfishness, intelligence, information, and capacity to follow political issues and the actions of government. Those changes, however, did not translate into any greater faith in the public’s political judgement at the expense of experts and politicians, since the two populism measures did not move.

The last set of attitudes deals with tolerance. Rather than examine traditional indicators (such as the civil liberties that one would allow to unpopular or dissident social groups), we looked at more general measures of open-mindedness/intransigence and authoritarianism. Only a single item was significantly affected: member became less likely to state that most ideas are not worthwhile. The other four did not improve, indicating that the assembly had little impact on these fundamental attitudes.

One might have predicted that civic attitudes would have been fostered among those who had positive experiences with assembly colleagues. In the Dutch case, where we explicitly measured perceptions of these experiences, neither being listened to nor belonging to the majority affected considerably this type of attitude change. Trust was the sole exception. Members who considered that others carefully listened to what they had to say reported slightly enhanced levels of trust.

So, did extensive collaboration towards a common goal alter individuals’ opinions of other people and their abilities? The effects of participation in the

9 In most studies of social capital, a reciprocal relationship is hypothesized between participation and trust.
assemblies were often in the direction anticipated by advocates for deliberative exercises, but they were not large. Members did become slightly more dutiful, trusting, and positive towards their fellow citizens, but populism and tolerance remained essentially static.

### 7.6 WERE ATTITUDE CHANGES A CONSEQUENCE OF EXTERNAL FACTORS?

We have attributed the relatively modest changes in attitudes and opinions reported by the members to their participation in the assembly. However, it is possible that other external factors such as the dynamics of the host community’s politics drove the observed changes. In the Netherlands, for example, while the Burgerforum was taking place, a government coalition fell, an election was called, and the assembly came to an end in the midst of an electoral campaign. Any or all these events might have been responsible for moving the attitudes of assembly members.

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**Table 7.4 Changing Attitudes: Duty, Trust, Populism, and Open-Mindedness**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Start</th>
<th>Change</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Duty and trust</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is the duty of every citizen to stay informed</td>
<td>83.8</td>
<td>+2.6*</td>
<td>206c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is the duty of every citizen to vote in every election</td>
<td>81.6</td>
<td>+2.8**</td>
<td>309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most people would not take advantage of you</td>
<td>77.4</td>
<td>−1.0</td>
<td>208c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most people can be trusted</td>
<td>77.2</td>
<td>+3.2</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>People and populism</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People in general are unselfish</td>
<td>50.9</td>
<td>+2.5**</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People in general are intelligent</td>
<td>60.1</td>
<td>+2.2**</td>
<td>316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People in general are informed</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>+2.6**</td>
<td>317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most people have enough sense to tell gov. is doing a good job</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>+7.2**</td>
<td>304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The major issues are too complicated for most voters (r)</td>
<td>53.5</td>
<td>+3.4**</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisions should be brought back to the people at grass roots</td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>+1.4</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would put my faith in the down-to-earth thinking of the people</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>−1.6</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Open-mindedness</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For most questions there is only one right answer (r)</td>
<td>80.7</td>
<td>−1.6</td>
<td>204c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most ideas are not worth the paper they are printed on (r)</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>+3.2*</td>
<td>187c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many problems have more than one acceptable solution</td>
<td>85.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>211c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A person should not be allowed to talk if they do not know (r)</td>
<td>69.1</td>
<td>+0.3</td>
<td>203c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obedience and respect for authority are most imp. virtues (r)</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>+1.0</td>
<td>208c</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All variables range from 0 to 100. c = Canada only.

** Significance at 0.05;*

* Significant at 0.10.
The way to sort out whether assembly participants were affected by other circumstances is to compare them to a group of similar citizens who did not participate in the assemblies. Dutch researchers collected data among a set of individuals who had expressed an interest in taking part in the process (after receiving one of the initial invitation letters), but who were not ultimately selected. These individuals were interviewed both before and after the assembly process. Thus, they provide a control group for Burgerforum members.

Table 7.5 presents attitude change results for both the Dutch assembly and the public control group. Differences between the two groups (assembly change minus control change) are reported in the last column, with a positive sign indicating greater improvement among assembly members.

The data indicate that the excluded citizens are not a perfect control. Their baseline attitudes differed somewhat from those of the assembly members: they were slightly more engaged politically and slightly less positive towards political actors than their Burgerforum counterparts. These differences may be due in part to selective non-response, which was small in the assembly surveys, but substantial in the control group. We suspect that non-participants particularly interested in politics and the assembly responded more favourably to the survey requests, and that this accounts for some of the differing opinions. In addition, disappointment for not being selected may have caused differences between the assembly and the control group. Nonetheless, given that our central concern is for the dynamics of opinions over time within the two groups, this is not a fatal flaw for the comparison.

For each of the four political engagement attitudes – interest, attention, and information – significant increases were observed among Burgerforum members, while they were absent in the general public. Moreover, all four differences between the two groups’ changes were significant. Therefore, the changes in political engagement can be attributed to the assembly process. Only one of the two self-confidence items moved significantly in the citizen assembly: the rise of members’ confidence in their ability to speak publicly. No such movement took place among the control group, so this change must also have stemmed from participation in the deliberative setting.

In contrast, the same number of significant improvements in opinions about politics occurred among the two groups (seven). Only one of the assembly changes was significantly larger than that of the control group (satisfaction with democracy). As a result, we cannot rule out external factors as the source of the more positive views about politicians, parties, and government in the Netherlands’ assembly. The same is true for the increase in the level of interpersonal trust expressed by Burgerforum members. The sentiment that most people can be trusted grew more within participants than non-participants, but not substantially more.

Contrary to the general pattern in the pooled analysis (Table 7.4), populism decreased in the Dutch assembly. Most notably, members became less inclined to have faith in the down-to-earth thinking of ordinary people compared to the knowledge of experts and intellectuals. Given that participants were engaged in a process in which they were often said to have become experts themselves, this
When Citizens Decide

Table 7.5 Changing Attitudes: Dutch Assembly versus Interested-Excluded Citizens

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political engagement</th>
<th>Assembly members</th>
<th>People not selected</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Start</td>
<td>Change</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>66.3</td>
<td>+10.0**</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention to political news</td>
<td>71.0</td>
<td>+9.7**</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention to domestic news</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>+10.6**</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informed about politics</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>+11.1**</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Self-confidence

| I feel nervous when I speak (r) | 45.0  | +5.2**  | 97  | 57.4  | −4.0   | 83 | +9.2**     |            |
| I am well qualified for politics| 56.0  | −0.9    | 53  | 53.6  | −5.2   | 64 | +4.3       |            |

Opinions about politics

| Those elected soon lose touch (r) | 66.1  | +1.1    | 90  | 60.9  | +3.9   | 82 | −2.8       |            |
| Politicians are ready to lie (r) | 80.6  | −6.3*   | 74  | 73.2  | 0.0    | 82 | −6.3       |            |
| Politicians are about as honest | 35.3  | +3.9    | 102 | 23.8  | +6.1** | 82 | −2.2       |            |
| MPs do not care about people (r) | 46.4  | +7.2**  | 83  | 43.8  | +2.9   | 70 | +4.4       |            |
| Elected officials are unselfish | 52.9  | −2.0    | 103 | 48.3  | +5.1** | 82 | −7.1**     |            |
| Elected officials are intelligent | 69.6  | +3.3**  | 106 | 65.8  | +2.9** | 80 | +0.4       |            |
| Elected officials are informed | 75.9  | +1.9    | 105 | 73.0  | +4.1** | 82 | −2.2       |            |
| Parties necessary for democracy | 70.1  | +1.4    | 97  | 72.0  | +2.2   | 75 | −0.8       |            |
| Parties present clear choices  | 47.7  | +7.3**  | 107 | 44.3  | +2.4   | 82 | +4.9       |            |
| Parties find solutions to problems | 46.4  | +5.3**  | 107 | 40.2  | +3.6   | 83 | +1.7       |            |
| Parties express people’s concerns | 36.1  | +9.8**  | 107 | 29.7  | +10.6**| 83 | −0.8       |            |
| All parties are the same (r)   | 71.1  | +1.7    | 98  | 64.6  | +5.7** | 82 | −4.0       |            |
| Government does not care (r)   | 43.7  | +9.7**  | 93  | 44.3  | +8.5** | 82 | +1.1       |            |
| Satisfaction with democracy    | 61.4  | +4.9**  | 108 | 58.9  | −0.4   | 82 | +5.3*      |            |

Duty, trust, people, and populism

| It is the duty of everyone to vote | 61.6  | +3.7    | 99  | 69.9  | +0.4   | 82 | +3.3       |            |
| Most people can be trusted        | 77.7  | +7.8*   | 103 | 72.3  | +3.6   | 83 | +4.2       |            |
| People in general are unselfish   | 52.0  | −1.4    | 103 | 49.3  | +4.6*  | 84 | −6.0*      |            |
| People in general are intelligent | 57.0  | +0.8    | 105 | 54.2  | +1.9   | 81 | −1.1       |            |
| People in general are informed    | 42.0  | +1.4    | 106 | 44.8  | +3.3*  | 83 | −1.9       |            |
| Issues are too complicated for (r) | 44.0  | −1.0    | 97  | 42.2  | +2.9   | 79 | −3.9       |            |
| Decisions at the grass roots      | 55.4  | −4.8*   | 77  | 61.2  | −1.0   | 67 | −3.8       |            |
| Faith in the thinking of people   | 58.1  | −11.6** | 86  | 59.0  | +2.6   | 78 | −14.2**    |            |

All variables range from 0 to 100.
** Significant at 0.05;
* significant at 0.10.
finding is somewhat ambiguous. Nevertheless, the attitude change does seem to have been produced by experiencing the assembly, since non-participants did not evolve in this way.

Although the results of this comparison of assembly members with Dutch citizens who did not have the same experience need to be treated with caution, they do show that, beyond generating some political engagement, the extended and intense assembly process contributed little, if anything, to making the participants better citizens.

7.7 CONCLUSION

In sum, our analysis indicates that, in general, citizen assembly members became more politically interested, more attentive to political news, and more informed about politics as a result of their participation in the assembly. In addition, their attitudes about politics also improved somewhat, partially a consequence of higher levels of political information. However, the Dutch data denote that these observed changes for views towards political actors could have stemmed from forces external to the assemblies. Among other attitudes, we only uncovered small changes, and they were not consistently in the expected direction across all assemblies and all measures. Civic duty and opinions of citizens may have climbed slightly, but self-confidence, trust, populism, and tolerance did not.

Since citizen assemblies constitute the most intensive participatory and deliberative process yet implemented, this meagre evidence of attitude change will be disconcerting to those who believe political participation improves citizenship. Some, following Mansbridge, may simply claim that the really important changes are too subtle to be measured ‘with the blunt instruments of social science’ (1999: 291). Other proponents of the idea might suggest that the assemblies were too limited in scope. Another line of defence is that the expected improvements were hampered by a ceiling effect due to relatively positive starting attitudes.

However, in the face of our findings from three distinct cases, these arguments fail to be convincing. Participation in these year-long public policy processes simply did not have a major impact on individuals’ general outlooks towards political actors, fellow citizens, and themselves. It may have created more interested and involved individuals, but it did not produce ‘better’ citizens.