



Social Planning Network of Ontario

Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform

Summary Report **on** **Special Outreach Focus Groups**

February 8, 2007

Prepared by
Peter Clutterbuck
Community Planning Consultant
Social Planning Network of Ontario

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Introduction

The Social Planning Network of Ontario (SPNO) was commissioned by the the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform to plan, organize and conduct four special outreach sessions as part of the Assembly's public consultation process. Although the public consultations were open to the entire community, the Citizens' Assembly wished to make sure that a special effort was made to get input from parts of the community that often have more difficulty participating in such initiatives.

The SPNO is a province-wide network of 20 locally-based social planning and community development councils that do research, policy analysis, community development and public education using participatory methods.

Four communities from different parts of the province were selected for the special outreach sessions. The sessions were conducted in:

- Mississauga with outreach to Peel Region on Tuesday, November 21, 2006, organized by the Social Planning Council of Peel.
- Sudbury on Wednesday, November 29, 2006, organized by the Social Planning Council of Sudbury.
- Ottawa on Wednesday, January 17, 2007, organized by the Social Planning Council of Ottawa/Conseil de planification sociale d'Ottawa.
- St. Catharines with outreach to Niagara Region on Monday, January 22, 2007, organized by the Niagara Social Assistance Reform Network on behalf of the SPNO

The special outreach sessions were invitational events designed to reach people from a variety of communities whose voices are often not heard on major public policy issues and proposals: low income people, single parents, immigrants, people with disabilities and people with personal and/or community work experience on issues such as literacy, housing and homelessness, hunger, supports to seniors, youth and families.

Through the community networks of the local host social planning councils and the Niagara SARC Network, local individuals were invited to participate in a three

hour facilitated session on electoral reform. Some special supports were provided to assist participation such as transportation assistance, language interpreters and material aids (e.g., the Ottawa SPC had the presentation materials converted into Braille for a participant without sight). All sessions were conducted in accessible local facilities familiar as meeting places to community participants.

Altogether, 115 people from diverse communities attended and participated in the four special outreach sessions, breaking down by community as follows:

Participation reflected well the diversity identified previously. Notably, participation in the Sudbury session included ten young Aboriginal community members. In Ottawa, French language facilitation and materials were provided to accommodate the participation of members who wished to discuss the material in their own language. As well, audio-visual presentations were shown in both Official Languages in the Ottawa session.

The format for the special outreach sessions varied from the consultation meetings of the Assembly open to the general public. Since only four sessions were to be held, and since it was expected that not many participants would be very familiar with the electoral systems and principles, a structured process of presentation, discussion and participation was planned. The four sessions employed an intensive three-hour agenda with the following components:

- (a) Introductions of Citizens' Assembly officials and participants and overview of the purpose and agenda for the session.
- (b) Screening of a DVD introducing the mandate and work of the Citizens' Assembly followed by questions of clarification to Secretariat officials.
- (c) Power Point presentation of the mandate of the Citizens' Assembly and the focus of the session with questions for clarification.
- (d) Opening questions and facilitated discussion on why participants vote and how well the current provincial voting system works.
- (e) Overview presentation by Power Point of the nine principles and their main elements that the Citizens' Assembly is using to assess possible options for electoral reform (principles/sub-elements are appended).
- (f) Facilitated discussion on the nine principles and their sub-elements individually.
- (g) Dotmocracy exercise in which participants individually indicate the degree of importance that they give to the principles and sub-elements.¹ (See

¹ Each participant was given three strips of four dots (four red for "high importance", four blue for "medium importance" and four yellow for "low importance") and was asked to give one vote to

attached list on the principles as presented for consideration in this exercise).

- (h) Review and discussion of dotmocracy results.
- (i) Screening of *Billy Ballot*, a short video prepared by the Secretariat that briefly reviews the main features of the four families of electoral systems (available along with other resource material at www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca).
- (j) Reflection on how the four families of voting systems in *Billy Ballot* reflect the principles that participants highly value and discussion of preferred options for electoral reform.
- (k) Conclusion and thanks to participants with information on how they can follow the work of the Citizens' Assembly.

With the exception of Sudbury, each session was facilitated by Peter Clutterbuck, Community Planning Consultant with the SPNO and attended by Susan Pigott, Executive Lead of Citizen Engagement with the Secretariat. In the case of Sudbury, inclement weather prevented the attendance of Peter Clutterbuck and Susan Pigott. Janet Gasparini, Executive Director, of the Social Planning Council of Sudbury, was briefed by telephone and used prepared session materials to facilitate the Sudbury group. Janet was aided by other Secretariat officials who were present, including the Executive Director of the Secretariat.

Three Citizens' Assembly members and the Chair of the Citizens' Assembly were able to attend and participate in the Niagara session. A Citizens' Assembly member also attended the Sudbury session. In both cases, the Assembly members were warmly welcomed and their attendance was much appreciated by session participants.

All sessions were stimulating and animated. Those attending participated enthusiastically and took strong interest in the work of the Citizens' Assembly and the discussion of the principles and electoral systems. Many participants held strong views on the electoral system and on other parts of the democratic process. Most were not familiar with the complexities of electoral systems and found the presentations and the discussion educational. Participants were very pleased that the Citizens' Assembly had made provision for these special outreach events. Some indicated that it would have been good to conduct more of them.

Thoughts about Voting

Participants were invited to express why they voted and why it is important to vote. This general opening line of inquiry led into comments and observations about the current provincial voting system.

each of the twelve principles/sub-elements (five of the principles are stand alone and three have seven sub-elements), which were listed on wall charts in the meeting room.

Participants from all four communities indicated that reasons for voting include:

- To be a responsible member of society.
- To fulfill a civic duty and contribute to the working of democracy (some thought that it was a “privilege” not to be neglected, abused or taken lightly).
- To exercise a right.
- To make a difference in the community.
- To select someone who will represent their interests and views on issues and be accountable to the people who elected them.
- To have a say, influence and participate in creating good government.
- To make change and stand up for people’s needs.
- To have legitimacy if critical of the elected government.

There were some strong feelings in all four communities about why people did not vote, which were beyond the scope of the Citizens’ Assembly mandate. Participants still requested that their views on other barriers to participation in the democratic political process be reported. Barriers include:

- Poor and homeless people with no fixed address are not recognized to vote.
- Language barriers, income barriers, literacy barriers for many people who are otherwise eligible to vote.
- Lack of good, accessible information and education about how the electoral system works (especially for newcomers and people without English or French) and about the various candidates and parties running for election.
- Physical access barriers for people with disabilities (e.g., printed ballots for people without sight; difficulty for some elderly and frail citizens to get to polling booths distant from their place of residence).

It is fair to say that participants in all four communities held a fairly cynical view of the current political system. Much of this feeling had to do with the behaviour of individuals and political parties in the democratic process. Participants were critical of politicians in general (not just at the provincial level) for serving their own interests and just seeking votes to achieve or maintain political power and not to represent the interests of everyday people.

“I want my vote to count, but I don’t think it does anymore”

“We don’t have much choice anymore. It’s important to me to have a good selection of choices.”

“Unless you are aligned with one of the three major parties, you are shut out of the system.”

“I vote strategically. I used to vote on issues, but not anymore. Now, I vote based on negative options, and I don’t like it.”

Attempts to focus participants on issues related to the current provincial electoral system, which the Citizens’ Assembly is charged with assessing, elicited the following observations:

- Limitations of the current party system in terms of choice.
- Concern that one’s vote doesn’t count when belonging to a minority group and not feeling strongly represented in political decision-making.

- Frustration about the lack of accountability once governments are elected.
- Elected politicians are too compelled to toe the party line rather than represent their constituents more independently.
- Concern about low participation rate and low interest of youth in voting.
- General sense of political apathy among the public, which reduces participation in voting.

In terms of improvements, participants focussed more on increasing communications between the community and elected representatives, providing more accessible information to the people, making political representatives more accountable to the electorate and helping people who feel disenfranchised to get a sense that they are being represented in government.

Thoughts about the Principles

The facilitator reviewed the principles that the Citizens’ Assembly will consider in assessing electoral systems, explaining that Legitimacy is an over-arching principle that the Assembly believes will be achieved if an electoral system adequately satisfies the other principles.

The discussion of principles in the four community special outreach sessions follows and concludes with a report of the results of a dotmocracy exercise used in each session. The discussion is reported in alphabetical order by principle and not necessarily in the order of discussion in each community session.

1. Accountability

Participants in all four communities felt very strongly about the need for improved accountability in the overall political process. Asked to think about how the principle of accountability might be reflected in the electoral system, there was a lot of support for the idea of ensuring the accountability of the individual elected

Member of the Provincial Parliament from the local area. The general preference was for voting for candidates who would represent the local area or riding rather than just voting for a political party.

Participants felt that parties should be more accountable but were less clear about how to ensure that could happen through the electoral system. Generally, they were more hopeful about holding their individual MPP accountable than about getting accountability from political parties.

“I would like to have the chance to vote for a local candidate and a party.”

“I want to vote for someone I know and who knows me – not for a political party.”

“There is little accountability in our current system. MPPs have to toe the party line.”

2. Effective Parliament

3. Effective Parties

Participants in the four special outreach sessions did not spend a lot of time on these two principles. Some participants appeared to have difficulty in seeing how the electoral system might improve the effectiveness of parties and the provincial legislature. In three communities participants noted that parties could be more effective if they adopted more collaborative approaches to work on issues and solve problems. Participants also recognized that having more parties might both ensure more people were represented and also compel elected members to work more effectively together.

“[Without parties], how do we organize 103 individual egos. It would take months to elect a leader and take a long time to make decisions. This is why we need parties.”

“Maybe we need more than 103 MPPs. I would like to see more of a policy role based on expertise . . . not just be given assignments because of their position in the party.”

As to the effectiveness of Parliament, participants would like some assurance that the opposition in the legislature has the capacity to criticize and debate government policy and legislation. The possibility of electing a Parliament with a very weak or even no opposition was seen as a weakness of the current First Past the Post electoral system.

4. Fairness of Representation

This principle was one of the most strongly supported among participants in all four special outreach sessions, especially with respect to demographic representation. There was unanimity among participants that they did not see themselves reflected in the current composition of the provincial government or provincial legislature or any level of government, legislature or municipal council.

They felt that the voices of marginalized people are not represented in the legislature and it is very hard for people from these parts of the population to run for elected office.

“True democracy is about everyone’s voices being heard.”

“Representation by population is important, but politicians should represent people, not geography.”

“I have no option to vote for someone like me because they are not on the ballot.”

“You can’t talk it unless you’ve walked it.”

“We need more people elected who understand what it means to be poor.”

“Society has changed a lot since 1792, but the people in our legislature have not.”

“I don’t like it when people win with a small percentage of the vote.”

“I don’t like proportionality because I like stable governments.”

“I like proportionality because it allows for more voices at the table.”

“I believe that votes should be equal to seats.”

“The problem with the parties having extra seats proportionately is that those individuals don’t represent anyone and don’t have anyone they are responsible to except the party itself.”

Low income people in Niagara and Ottawa; people with physical and intellectual disabilities and with mental health problems in Peel, Ottawa and Sudbury; Aboriginal people in Sudbury; immigrants and people of colour in Peel and Ottawa; all expressed similar concerns about not feeling fairly represented in the provincial legislature and government. They linked this lack of representation with low voter turn-out rates among these parts of the population.

Representation in the legislature in proportion to votes received in the election also made sense to participants in the special outreach sessions.

Participants in Ottawa and Peel felt more strongly about the importance of the principle of proportionality. Ottawa participants thought it would increase voter choices. There was no clear consensus in Niagara, with some participants expressing reservations about proportionality’s effect on stable government.

In Sudbury proportionality did not get as much attention as the issue of representation by population. Sudbury participants felt that larger population centres, mostly in the south, have more influence in the provincial government.

5. Simplicity and Practicality

There was not a lot of discussion in the four special outreach groups on this principle. Sudbury participants felt this principle would best be ensured with better education for young people about the electoral system. In Peel and Ottawa, literacy was raised as an issue for some people in dealing with the ballot. People with intellectual disabilities, people without sight, and some newcomers also pointed out the limitations to their participation by an electoral system dependent on written materials such as the ballot. There were two views about systems that have candidates' pictures on the ballot: some feeling it would be helpful in their choice to see people running with whom they could identify; others feeling that pictures might favour certain candidates.

6. Stable and Effective Government

“There is too much centralized control in our legislature.”

“If we only voted for a party as in a system of proportional representation, there wouldn't be any stability in the resulting government. It would cause too much conflict.”

“Minority and coalition governments: sometimes they are stable, sometimes they are not.”

“Stability is important because you have to get work done. But, there is no reason to think that a coalition government would not be stable.”

Participant views varied on the importance of this principle. Mostly it was discussed in relation to the consequences of introducing an electoral system with proportional representation. Many participants felt the trade-off to get better representation was worth the loss of consistent majority governments. In Peel and Ottawa participants felt elected representatives would have to adapt and work more cooperatively in order to ensure effective stable government. Some other participants expressed more concern about instability in governments with the introduction of proportionality.

7. Stronger Voter Participation

Participants in Ottawa, Niagara and Peel expressed strong support for this principle. In Sudbury, there was not much confidence about the political system gaining the people's trust, and there was concern about the lack of engagement of youth and Aboriginal people in the electoral process.

Most participants felt that improved performance by elected politicians would increase voter turn-out. They also indicated that information on candidates and party policies needs to be more available and accessible to voters, so that they could make informed choices at the ballot box. There were mixed feelings about

the wisdom of making voting mandatory with penalties. Some felt this was justified because voting is a democratic privilege that citizens should be compelled to honour; others worried that compulsory voting infringed on democratic freedoms.

Participants in Niagara and Peel thought that incentives rather than penalties should be used to encourage stronger voter participation, although this proposal is beyond the mandate of the Citizens' Assembly. Some groups, such as low income people, could use supports to vote, such as bus fare to get to the polling stations. Ottawa participants thought that community organizations could provide voter education, if they had the resources.

“The most important thing is to increase voter participation. Maybe through incentives. Make voting day a statutory holiday – give a tax break for people who vote.”

“Politicians need to see that there are consequences if they are not accountable. We need to have higher voter turnout to accomplish this. If a lot of people vote, politicians have to listen up.”

8. Voter Choice: Quantity and Quality

“The system should increase opportunities for diversity in choices.”

“I want to see multiple candidates for the same party.”

“When I vote I look at the individual candidate and the party. I may like the individual but the party they belong to might influence my final decision.”

“It’s important to have meaningful differences between candidates. There has to be quality information before the vote and follow up after the vote – that’s how quality is expressed.”

“We need more voter choice but sometimes people can be overwhelmed by choice.”

“It’s getting more and more confusing as all parties sound and act the same.”

Participants in the four communities expressed more support in general for the principle of quality in voter choice than in quantity. When different voting options were discussed, there was recognition that some options, which allowed for rank ordering candidate preferences or voting both for an individual and a party, would provide more choice than the current provincial system and may improve the quality of candidate or program offerings.

Some participants expressed concern about the complexity or confusion that might result from too much choice. There was general

agreement across the four communities that more clear and accessible information about candidates and parties would greatly assist voters in making choices however they would be presented on the ballot.

Voting for Importance of the Principles: Dotmocracy

The process for the special outreach sessions provided an opportunity for individual participants to “vote” for their own preferences from among the electoral design principles and their sub-elements. Following the discussion of the principles, each participant was given three strips of four dots (four red for “high importance”, four blue for “medium importance” and four yellow for “low importance”) and was asked to give one vote to each of the twelve principles/sub-elements, which were listed on wall charts in the meeting room. As Legitimacy was considered an over-arching principle, it was not included in the voter choices.

The results provide a sense of which principles that participants judged were more and which less important in designing an electoral system. While not a formal poll or survey, the results do provide at least an approximation of the participants’ preferred weightings of the principles in terms of importance.

The following figures show the overall dotmocracy results for the participants in all four communities and the dotmocracy results for each community. The numbers in the bar graphs indicate the percent of all participants indicating the degree of importance (red bar = “high importance”, blue bar = “medium importance”, and yellow bar = “low importance”) plus the percent of missing or no votes for the principles (gray bar).

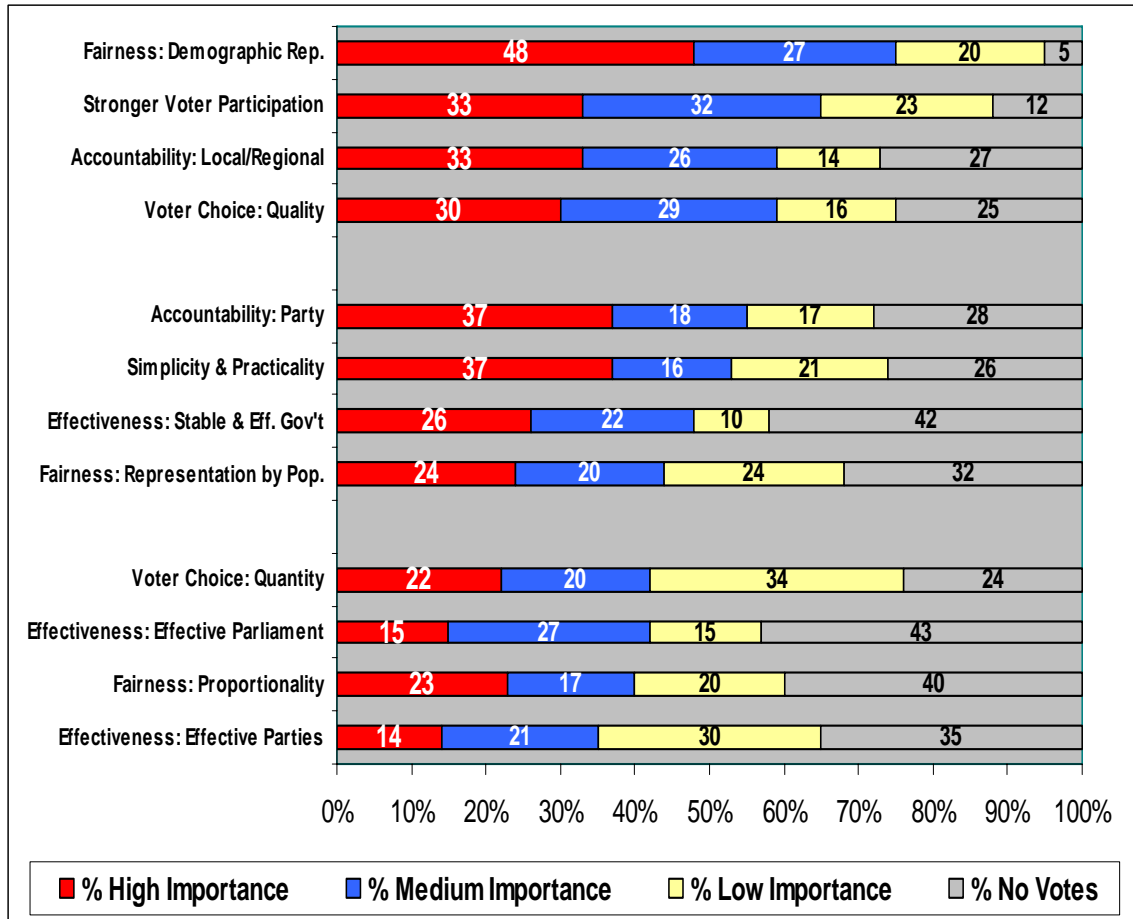
The principles in each figure are presented in descending order from the highest to the lowest preferences by combining percentages for the red (high importance) and blue (medium importance) bars. The results are also shown in three tiers of four principles each. The top tier in each figure indicates the most important principles; the middle tier indicates mid-level importance; and the bottom tier indicates the less important principles in the judgment of the participants.

The combined votes of participants from all four communities show a strong preference for Demographic Representation (75% combined vote for “high” and “medium” importance), Stronger Voter Participation (65%), Local/Regional Accountability (59%) and Quality in Voter Choice (59%). Demographic Representation also had the highest overall vote for “most important” principle (48%). Party Accountability and Simplicity and Practicality are at the top of the middle tier, but, notably, participants gave both Party Accountability and Simplicity and Practicality the second highest proportion of “high importance” votes of all the principles (37%).

In the combined results, Proportionality is low in the third tier at 40% for high and medium importance. This low ranking is attributable primarily to the Sudbury group where only 9% of participants indicated medium importance, 50% voted low importance and 41% did not vote at all on Proportionality. The combined vote for Proportionality among the other three communities is 50% for high and medium importance, which would place Proportionality in the second tier of importance among participants in Peel, Niagara and Ottawa combined.

In terms of the third tier of principles for the combined community vote, there is a notably high percentage of votes for “low importance” for Quantity of Voter Choice (34%) and Effective Parties (30%). Among all the principles, these two received the highest percentage of “low importance” votes among special outreach group participants.

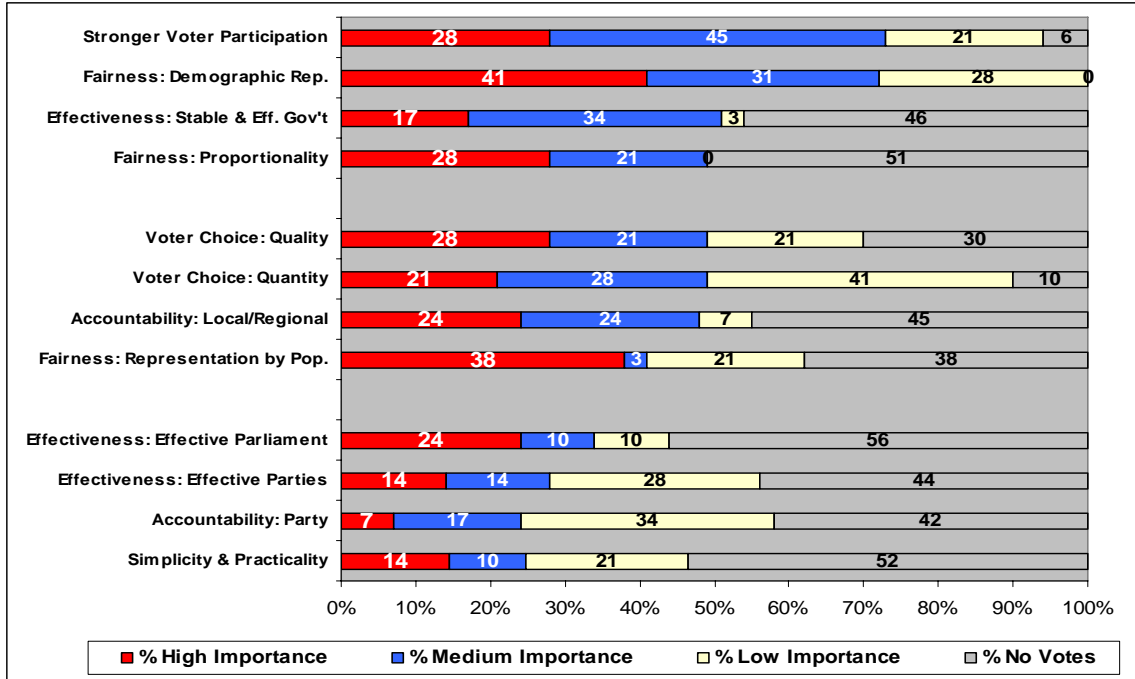
**Dotmocracy Results for All Special Outreach Groups Combined
(Number Voting = 100)**



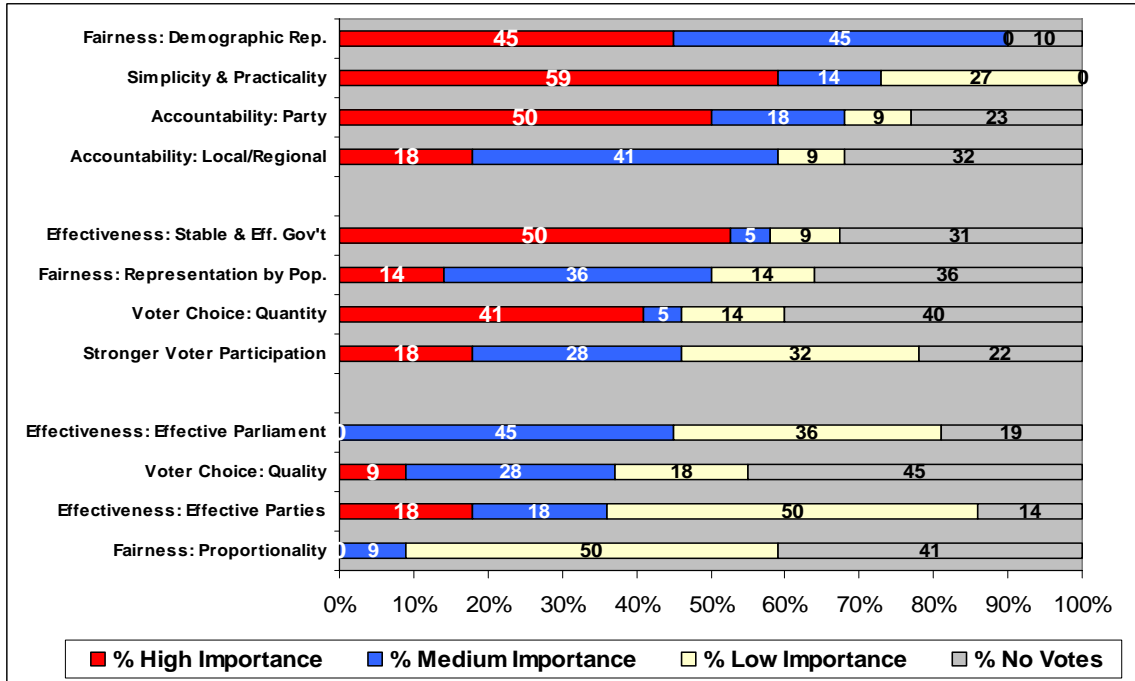
Results by community follow on the next two pages. Ottawa, Niagara and Peel show relatively similar results, while Sudbury’s preferences show the greatest difference among the four communities. No principle is in the top tier in all

communities. Among all four special outreach groups, however, Demographic Representation, Stronger Voter Participation and Local/Regional Accountability are in the top two tiers of importance in each community.

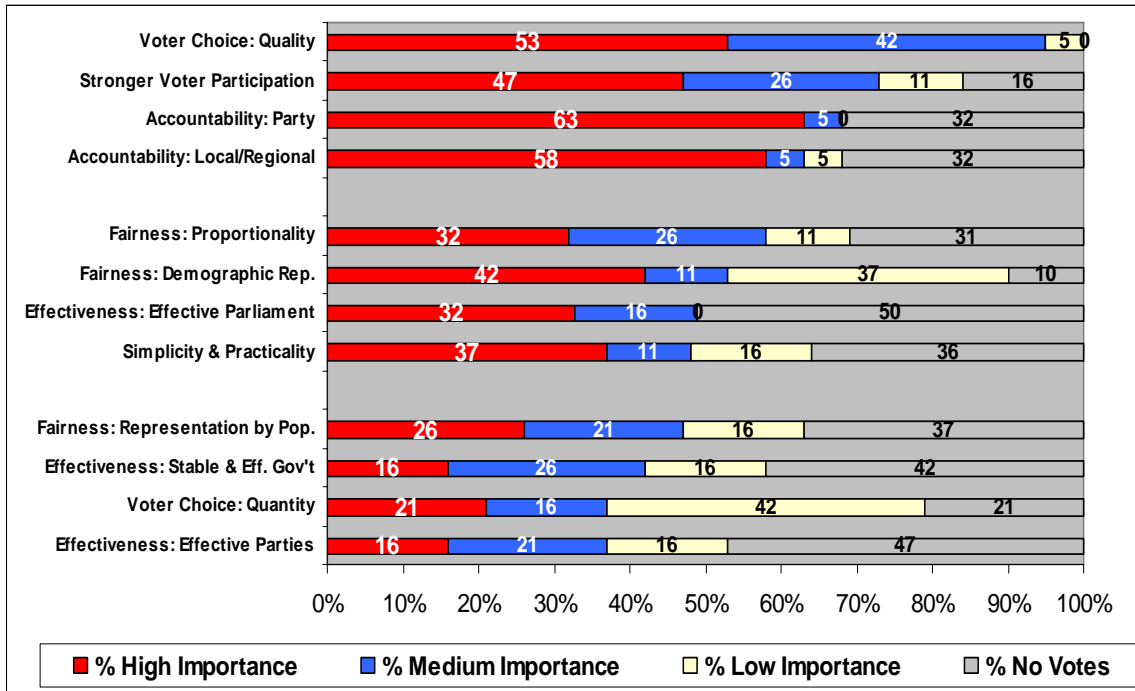
Special Outreach Sessions: Dotmocracy Results by Community
Ottawa -- No. Voting = 29



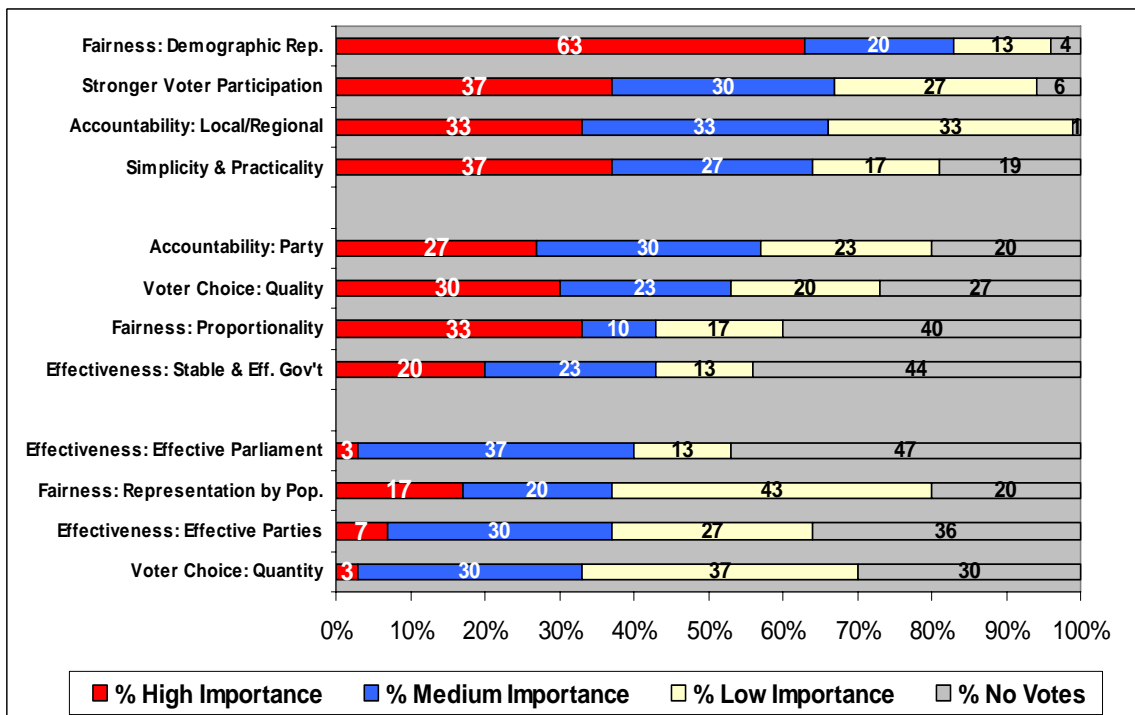
Sudbury – No. Voting = 22



Niagara – No. Voting = 19



Peel – No. Voting = 30



Thoughts about Electoral Systems

Following a screening of *Billy Ballot*, participants were asked to comment on the four families of electoral systems presented and how they reflect the principles that participants feel are important. There was not a lot of time for this part of the process and this was the first time that most participants had been presented with this much information about different electoral systems.

Participants in the Peel group had strong consensus that the current First Past the Post system did not reflect most of the principles that they valued more highly, although it was the simplest (fourth in importance in Peel's voting). They expressed a preference for a system that would promote voter participation, fairness in representation and improved political accountability. A few indicated support for a straight proportional system, which would demand more of parties to work effectively in coalition governments. The Mixed Member Proportional system, however, was most popular among Peel participants in that it provided a good balance between proportionality and local accountability.

Participants in the Ottawa special outreach group had similar opinions to Peel participants, especially on the benefits of proportional systems. Most Ottawa participants wanted assurance that any proportional system would keep a component of electing candidates to represent ridings. Many felt proportional systems would improve voter choice including allowing more diverse representation in the legislature. They did express, however, a concern that the Mixed Member Proportional system might be hard for voters to understand without good voter education programs. Quality and Quantity of Voter Choice were ranked high in the mid-tier level of participant preferences in the Ottawa group's dotmocracy exercise.

Sudbury participants were less positive about the prospects of a different electoral system changing the democratic political process significantly. They concluded that it did not matter which system would be used. They did, however, express an inclination for the Mixed Member Proportional system after seeing it explained in the *Billy Ballot* video, to which they responded very enthusiastically. In general, Sudbury participants felt that people would need to see change in political behaviour before they would regain trust in the electoral process. There needs to be greater effort put into open and honest communications between the public and local politicians.

Participants in Niagara were also impressed with the information provided in the *Billy Ballot* video. There was a general sense that change in the electoral system would be beneficial and a recognition that other electoral systems reflected principles that the participants felt were important and better than the current system. Improving both local and party accountability was highly valued among Niagara participants. Although there was no consensus on the preferred voting system, participants clearly stated that the session had been very educational

and had given them a lot of information for thinking about an improved or alternative electoral system.

Other Thoughts

Participants in all four communities felt strongly that there were major barriers to the participation of many people in the general democratic political process at all levels of government, which went beyond the electoral system itself. Even though these issues may be outside the mandate of the Citizens' Assembly, the participants urged the Citizens' Assembly to report these concerns and suggest government action to eliminate these barriers. These concerns include:

- Politicians need to interact more with their constituents between elections and to communicate more honestly and directly in order to encourage stronger voter participation and promote accountability.
- Politics is still primarily about who has the most money to advertise themselves. Equity should be built into the process – information should be disseminated in an accessible format – TV, radio, internet, etc.
- There are no supports for people on low incomes, new citizens, people with disabilities and others to have the chance to run for elected office and this should be remedied.
- People need more information and political education in order to be more engaged in the democratic process, even between elections. Many participants indicated that they don't know enough about the candidates when they go to the polls.
- There should be particular attention paid to educating young people in the democratic process and electoral system and to get them engaged from an informed basis early in life.
- There is a need for more financial transparency in government and more control of party financing. There is also a concern that organized lobby groups have too much access to and influence on elected representatives.
- There should be more free votes in the legislature and greater use of public referenda.

Conclusion

The special outreach sessions conducted in Ottawa, Niagara, Peel and Sudbury successfully engaged people from parts of the population that are often left out of debate on important public policy issues. It is clear from both the level of participation and the enthusiasm displayed by the participants that they have a strong interest in public policy issues and much to contribute.

Participants in all four communities clearly and consistently expressed frustration with their lack of access to and influence on public affairs. They had strong feelings about the failure of the current electoral system in terms of adequately representing their interests and reflecting their views. They did see merit in other electoral systems in terms of alleviating these concerns of lack of representation. They also, however, identified many other barriers to their participation in the democratic political process beyond the electoral system.

Clearly, the thoughtfulness and energy that the participants brought to this opportunity to make input to the deliberations of the Citizens' Assembly belie any notion of political apathy among many Ontarians who struggle to have their voices heard.

Appendix

Which principles are most important to you?

Principles	Importance		
	High	Medium	Low
FAIRNESS OF REPRESENTATION			
<p style="text-align: center;">→ Demographic</p> Legislature reflects the make-up of the Ontario population (men/women, age, ethno-cultural diversity, income levels).			
<p style="text-align: center;">→ Proportionality</p> Share of seats a party wins is about equal to share of votes it got in election.			
<p style="text-align: center;">→ Representation by population</p> Each MPP represents about the same number of people.			
EFFECTIVENESS			
<p style="text-align: center;">→ Effective Parties</p> The electoral system supports parties that can formulate policy alternatives for public debate and mobilize voters.			
<p style="text-align: center;">→ Stable & effective government</p> Electoral system produces governments that can make policy decisions and implement their programs.			
<p style="text-align: center;">→ Effective Parliament</p> The legislature works well with a government and effective opposition.			
VOTER CHOICE			
<p style="text-align: center;">→ Quantity</p> Voters have a number of choices on the ballot.			
<p style="text-align: center;">→ Quality</p> Genuinely different parties and programs to choose from.			
ACCOUNTABILITY			
<p style="text-align: center;">→ Local/regional accountability</p> Local reps are held responsible for gov't actions.			
<p style="text-align: center;">→ Party accountability</p> Parties are held responsible for gov't actions.			
STRONGER VOTER PARTICIPATION			
Electoral system helps motivate more people to vote			
SIMPLICITY AND PRACTICALITY			
System works and voters understand it.			