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(supersedes previous submission of same title)

## The Virtue of Simplicity

**Abstract:** The vote-counting method must be simple so that voters can verify election outcomes and understand the effects of their votes. Test the practicality of your proposal by asking typical voters to determine the winners of sample elections.

### WHY SIMPLICITY IS IMPORTANT

Simplicity is listed as just one desirable characteristic of electoral systems, but it is fundamental to many of the others. A truly democratic election requires Legitimacy, Voter Choice, Participation, and Accountability — and all of these things depend on Simplicity:

*Legitimacy: All must have confidence that the outcome correctly reflects the votes cast.*

If the procedure for counting votes and determining a winner is too complex for citizens to fully understand, they will lack confidence that the result is fair and accurate. They may dispute the result, or they may justly argue that many of the voters did not understand what they were voting for.

**Legitimacy requires Simplicity.**

*Voter Choice: Voters must be able to accurately express their intent with their votes.*

Giving voters more options is not always good for voter choice. Giving them options they do not understand is harmful. If the cause-and-effect connection between an individual ballot and the election outcome is complicated, voters will be unclear about how to express their intent. They may even allow their votes to be influenced.

In Australia, voters find the ranking procedure either tedious enough or complicated enough that most voters follow party-issued "How to Vote" cards that dictate exactly how to rank all the candidates. Political parties make deals with each other to negotiate the rankings they print on these cards. Consequently, the rankings on most ballots reflect party strategy, not voter preference. Going too far in complexity produces voters who willingly submit to party influence, which defeats the original purpose of offering voters the flexibility of ranking. **Voter Choice requires Simplicity.**

*Participation: A large majority of citizens must be represented in elections and in the democratic process.*

If voters do not feel they can understand the consequences of their votes, they will not be inclined to vote. The motivation to vote depends on the belief that one will have a direct and predictable effect on the outcome.

If the effect of casting a ballot is paradoxical, voters may even feel that the electoral system has cheated them. This can happen in cases where representation contradicts the popular vote, as in the Bush-Gore presidential election, or in systems such as the Alternative Vote where persuading more people to vote in favour of a candidate can cause the candidate to lose. Failures such as these can profoundly discourage voters from the process. **Participation requires Simplicity.**

*Accountability: Voters should be able to identify decision-makers and hold them to account.*

Voting is a way of communicating, not just a way of selecting winners. The strength of an electoral victory determines a representative's mandate to carry out their campaign platform. Election outcomes also provide feedback to parties on whether they are meeting the needs of their supporters. To hold a representative or party accountable, voters need be able to address their votes as directly as possible to reach the specific target of their support or criticism. If the counting procedure is too complicated, these messages cannot get through. **Accountability requires Simplicity.**

To these characteristics already acknowledged by the Assembly that derive from Simplicity, one more must be added. The citizens of Ontario will be called upon to evaluate the Assembly's proposal in a referendum. The more complicated that proposal is, the less likely it will be that the voters in this referendum understand its advantages and disadvantages, and hence the less likely its outcome will fairly represent the interests of the citizens. **Evaluation of the proposal itself requires Simplicity.**

## **LEARNING FROM THE BC CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY PROCESS**

The BC Citizens' Assembly process yielded an electoral system that was too complex. The excessive complexity is evident from the Assembly's very own published materials even though they were intended to promote the system they designed.

The Assembly's 20-page Final Report provides a picture of a sample ballot but **does not explain exactly how one counts the votes and determines winners**. This is not an acceptable description of an electoral system! To find out how to count votes, one must read the 280-page Technical Report. Ask yourself how many people can be expected to read the Final Report, or the Technical Report. But the vote-counting procedure is an absolutely essential part of any electoral system. It is impossible to fairly evaluate an electoral system without knowing precisely how votes are translated into seats.

The purpose of the Final Report was to propose a new electoral system, and yet it failed even to describe what it was proposing. The fact that the system was too complicated to fit into its own proposal is a telling indicator that something went wrong.

I recommend that, for all the reasons mentioned above, the Citizens' Assembly commit to providing a description of how votes are cast **and counted**, complete enough for a reader to understand ballots and determine winners, in their main report and in descriptions of the proposed system presented to the public. If the complete description is too large to fit, this should motivate reconsideration of the proposal.

## HOW SIMPLE IS SIMPLE ENOUGH?

You, the members of the Ontario Citizens' Assembly, have been immersed in studying, discussing, and debating electoral systems for many months. I am grateful for your tremendous investment of time and effort in this process. Please beware, however, that your immersion may have shifted your perspective on what is easy or difficult, straightforward or complex. Most voters do not have the training and experience you have now gathered, and are unlikely to be familiar with terminology and concepts that are now second nature for you. Therefore, I caution against trusting your intuition to judge what is "simple enough."

Instead, test.

I recommend that you find voters who are not involved in electoral reform — on the street or in your communities, for example — and test your ideas with them. Present them with sample ballots. Can they understand how to cast a ballot? Can they understand how to express what they want on the ballot? How long does it take to explain how to determine the winners? Do they understand the procedure well enough that they can perform it themselves or explain it back to you? These will be the true measures of the simplicity and practicality of an electoral system. These experiments will also give you feedback on your proposal so that you can improve its chances of success in a referendum.

A successful and legitimate electoral system will need to have an explanation that is short. Try to describe the proposed system in two or three paragraphs of text, or in less than five minutes of talking, such that you can give this explanation to someone and ask them to determine the winners of a sample election. If you test a proposal this way and find it difficult to achieve a high level of understanding and confidence with a short explanation, then I urge you to revise the proposal.

Thank you for your attention to these concerns. Respectfully submitted,

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