



Evaluating Citizen Engagement in Policy Making

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By

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Evaluating Citizen Engagement in Policy Making

1. Introduction

Over the past decade or so, there have been increasing opportunities for ordinary citizens to participate in policy-making on a range of issues – e.g. community planning, environmental management, health care and quality, political reform, and science and technology.

There have also been a variety of innovative methods used to involve the public – citizens’ assemblies, citizens’ juries, deliberative polls, town hall meetings, electronic dialogue circles, etc.

There has however been very little research or evaluation of the effectiveness of such exercises. A survey of member states conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2001 noted:

“A striking imbalance between the amount of time, money and energy that OECD countries invest in strengthening government-citizen relations and the amount of attention they pay to evaluating effectiveness and impact on policy-making.”¹

And a subsequent review (2005) of the theory and practice in 8 OECD countries concluded that:

“Much remains to be done in terms of developing technical tools and specific methodologies for the evaluation of public participation.”²

What are the criteria that we could use to evaluate public participation initiatives? Are these criteria the same regardless of the methods or tools of citizen engagement that are used? Are there benchmarks against which the quality of a participation exercise could be measured?

This paper proposes an evaluation framework and related criteria for use in evaluating a citizen engagement initiative and applies it to a case study - the Ontario Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform – to test its usefulness.³ The paper concludes with some suggestions about how the evaluation framework could be further developed or applied.

2. Proposed Evaluation Framework

2.1 Key Factors

Earlier theoretical and applied work on evaluating citizen engagement focussed primarily on process issues, largely ignoring the purpose of the exercises.⁴ The predominant approach was to look at best practices based on a set of principles, and the process was often considered to be an

¹ OECD, 2001, 13.

² OECD, 2005, 17.

³ The author headed up a team from the Institute On Governance that was appointed by the Citizens’ Assembly Secretariat to independently monitor and evaluate the Assembly process.

⁴ As summarized up to 1999 in the literature review in DOJ (2001).

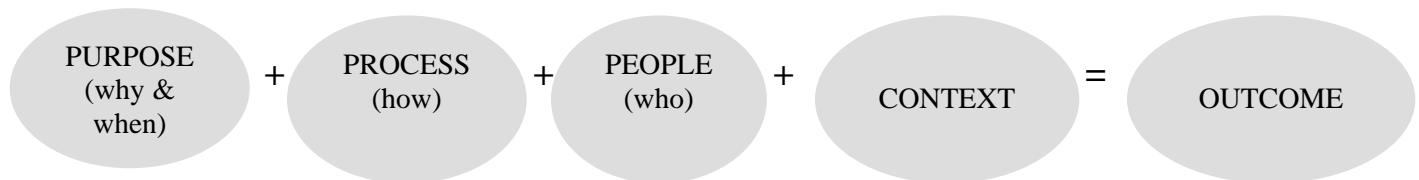
end in itself rather than a means to an end. Where the purpose of citizen engagement was considered, it was often linked to certain concepts or norms such as empowerment or democracy, rather than the specific purpose of the exercise itself.

More recently, attention has also been focussed on the contextual factors that can mitigate the effectiveness of a particular citizen engagement initiative,⁵ and the outcomes of the exercise – whether in terms of policy, the decision-makers, or the participants.⁶ A few academics have also looked at the people involved in the engagement initiative and the extent to which they are representative of the population in terms of demographic characteristics, views or interests.⁷

Involve and the National Consumer Council in the UK (2008) have proposed a framework for evaluating a public participation initiative that is based on five key factors:

1. Purpose
2. Process
3. People
4. Context
5. Outcome

The relationship of the factors is illustrated in the following diagram and each factor is discussed in further detail below:



I will use this evaluation framework because it incorporates all of the factors that have been considered to be important, and will draw on the literature to identify related criteria for each of the key factors.

2.2 Purpose

“Purpose” refers to the reason why a public participation exercise has been established. It underlies every other element in the framework and also determines at what point in the process citizens are engaged.

⁵ Rowe and Frewer (2000) and Rowe et al (2005).

⁶ Abelson and Gauvin (2006).

⁷ Barnes et al (2003), Brown (2006), James (2008) and Warren (2008).

Proponents often ascribe noble and far-reaching objectives to public participation in policy-making.⁸ These objectives include:

- To increase legitimacy or public support for the decisions that are taken or the policies that are adopted;
- To reduce or resolve conflicts among competing interests;
- To improve the quality of decisions by considering the broader public interest and not just vested interests;
- To increase accountability through direct public scrutiny or oversight;
- To develop a better informed, more committed and active citizenry;
- To increase social capital and reduce social exclusion; and
- To reduce the democratic deficit by increasing opportunities for the public to participate.

The United Nations considers that public participation is an objective of value in and of itself – in other words, it is a fundamental human right to participate in society's decision-making processes.⁹

It would however be unfair to hold any one public participation initiative accountable for achieving all of these objectives. Many of them are better suited to system-wide or nation-wide approaches to encouraging public participation.

In order to be more specific about the rationale for engaging citizens in policy-making, therefore, I find it helpful to look at the purpose of a particular initiative through a couple of lenses. One lens is the continuum of participation and the other lens is the policy making cycle.

2.2.2 Continuum of Participation

There is a continuum of participation based on the degree of influence that citizens can have. Each stage in the continuum has a different purpose. The continuum ranges from communication through consultation to engagement as follows:

Communication – a one way flow of information from government to citizens telling them about policies, programs or services (or even opportunities to participate); or a one way flow of information from citizens to government telling them about issues, concerns, views or problems.

Consultation – a dialogue or discussion between government and citizens about an issue.

Engagement – a discussion between government and citizens and among citizens, usually facilitated, and with more emphasis on arriving at a consensus or making a decision and working in partnership.

The degree of influence on policy-making increases as citizens move from being the recipients or mere providers of information, to being consulted, and then to being engaged.

⁸ For example, see Barnes et al (2003), Beierle and Cayford (2002), Department of Social and Economic Development (2007), Fung and Wright (1999), Involve (2005), Lukensmeyer and Torres (2006), OECD (2001 and 2007), and Mendelberg (2002).

⁹ Department of Social and Economic Development, 2007, p. 27.

2.2.3 Policy Making Cycle

Public participation can also come into various steps in the policy making cycle for different purposes. These steps are:



Defining the problem includes research, analysis and intelligence gathering. Input from citizens could be sought in terms of what the problem is, how it presents itself, and what measures are already being taken to address it.

Seeking a solution entails identifying criteria for assessing options to address the problem, developing alternatives, and evaluating those alternatives using the criteria identified. The public could be involved in any one of these tasks.

Making a decision in terms of government policy normally resides at the political level, but there are instances where citizens could take the decision (e.g. through a referendum) or where citizens could recommend what decision should be taken.

Finally, **implementing and evaluating a decision** could involve the public – as clients, recipients, partners, or through an advisory or monitoring body.

At each step in the policy making cycle, there may therefore be a need to communicate, consult or engage the public.

2.2.4 Purpose Criteria

Given that the degree of influence that the public will have and the stage at which their input is sought will vary, the criteria for evaluating the purpose of a public participation exercise could therefore be:

Values-based - The issue being addressed requires value judgments or input based on the personal experiences of citizens, not just objective knowledge and information from experts.

Policy Influence - The output of the exercise is linked to the policy process and will have a genuine impact on policy.

Task definition - The nature and scope of the exercise is clearly defined in terms of its degree of influence and the stage of the policy process.

2.3 Process

“Process” refers to the process that is followed in a participatory exercise- in other words, the mechanism that is used in order to obtain the public input, whether it be a public survey, public meetings, an e-consultation, an advisory committee, or a citizens' jury or assembly. The selection of the mechanism that is used should be tailored to the purpose of the exercise as well as other

considerations such as the resources and time available and the type of participants that will be involved.

2.3.1 Process Criteria

For citizen engagement initiatives, we have developed evaluation criteria that are based on principles of deliberative dialogue:¹⁰

Learning – participants are given an understanding of the issue and information is presented in an unbiased way.

Dialogue – there is an equal opportunity to participate; the framing of the debate is based on an agreed set of principles and objectives; and positive relationships among participants are maintained based on commitment, respect and trust.

Decision-making – the decisions to be taken are clear; the decision-making process is well structured; there are agreed procedures for decision-making; and the Chair, resource persons and support staff provide neutral support.

Transparency - the entire process is open and transparent to the public, with privacy respected where necessary.

Adequately resourced – sufficient time and resources are provided within reasonable constraints.

2.4 People

“People” can refer to all of the people involved in the participatory exercises - not only the participants but also the specialists, support staff and decision-makers. I deal with the criteria related to the latter groups in other sections on the purpose, process and context, so will focus on the participants in this section.

2.4.1 People Criteria

The key evaluation criteria for this factor in terms of the participants are:

Representative – the participants are a broadly representative sample of the public. The characteristics that are applied in drawing up the sample depend on the issue being investigated and whether only affected citizens are targeted or the general public. There are also practical and financial limitations to the size and nature of the sample.

Legitimacy – the general or affected public see themselves reflected in the composition of the members in terms of demographics, views and experiences; and perceive the participants to be acting independently.

2.5 Context

“Context” refers to the contextual and environmental factors that will mediate the effectiveness of the participation exercise and the methods that are used. These factors are generally outside of

¹⁰ These principles have been outlined by various organizations including the United Nations, the OECD, Involve, America Speaks and others.

the control of those that are planning a participation exercise, but should be taken into account. They include:

- The historical, political and social context;
- The level of government involved – community, local, provincial, national or international;
- The scale and type of issue;
- The pre-existing relationships among the public and between the public and the sponsor;
- The institutional setting.

2.6 Outcome

“Outcome” links back to the purpose and the output of the exercise, and can be looked at in terms of the sponsor, the participants or the public, as follows:

Better decisions – the initiative leads to more transparent, responsive and effective policy.

Better citizens – the initiative leads to more aware, active and knowledgeable citizens.

Public acceptance – the output and outcome of the exercise is accepted as legitimate by the public.

To these criteria, I would also add:

Relevance – the initiative is consistent with government priorities, addresses an actual need, and is the most appropriate approach given the alternatives (i.e. representative democracy, direct democracy, executive or bureaucratic decision-making).

Having outlined a proposed evaluation framework of five elements and related criteria, I will now apply it to a concrete example – the Ontario Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform – to see how useful it is for the purpose of analysis.

3. The Case of the Ontario Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform

3.1 Background

The Ontario Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform was created in 2006 to assess Ontario’s current electoral system (first-past-the-post) and to recommend whether to retain it or adopt a different one. Any recommendation for change was to be put to the Ontario electorate in a referendum during the next provincial election.

The Assembly consisted of 103 randomly selected citizens from each of the electoral ridings in Ontario, plus the Chair, George Thomson. The members were supported by a Secretariat and over the course of nine months from September 2006 to May 2007: learned about electoral systems; consulted with a broad cross-section of Ontarians; deliberated; and ultimately decided to recommend a Mixed Member Proportional System (MMP).

A provincial referendum was held on the Citizens' Assembly recommendation during the provincial election of October 10, 2007. 63% of voters voted in favour of keeping the existing electoral system and only 37% voted in favour of the alternative proposed by the Citizens' Assembly – well below the threshold required to change the electoral system.

Was the Ontario Citizens' Assembly a success? Does applying the evaluation framework help to answer this question? I will evaluate the Citizens' Assembly against the criteria for purpose, process, people and outcome in my proposed framework, taking into account various contextual factors that I consider to be relevant.

3.2 Purpose Evaluation

When assessed against the purpose criteria, the Ontario Citizens' Assembly could be considered a success.

3.2.1 Values-based

Some media commentators and politicians argued against the use of a Citizens' Assembly and in favour of an expert panel in order to review and recommend a change in the electoral system. Although the potential reform of an electoral system can be a very technical issue, I would argue that it is an issue that affects citizens directly as the electorate and therefore one that they should have a say in. In addition, electoral reform requires trade-offs among a number of values and preferences and different electoral systems reflect different sets of values.

Eight principles to frame the debate on electoral systems were originally proposed by a Select Committee on Electoral Reform of the Ontario Legislature that was tasked with drafting the terms of reference for the Citizens' Assembly. The Citizens' Assembly itself thought it was important to add a ninth principle. The nine principles were:¹¹

1. **Legitimacy** – the electoral system inspires the confidence of citizens in both its process and its results.
2. **Fairness of Representation** – the legislature reflects the makeup of Ontario's population; parties hold seats in proportion to the votes they receive; and each vote carries equal weight.
3. **Voter Choice** – voters have both quantity and quality of choice on the ballot.
4. **Effective Parties** – the system supports strong parties that can offer different perspectives.
5. **Stable and Effective Government** – the system produces strong, stable governments.
6. **Effective Parliament** – the legislature includes government and opposition parties and can perform its functions successfully.
7. **Stronger Voter Participation** – the system encourages more people to vote.
8. **Accountability** – voters can identify decision-makers and hold them to account.
9. **Simplicity and Practicality** – the system is practical and people can easily understand how it works.

¹¹ Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, 2007, *One Ballot, Two Votes*, 4-5.

As with any set of principles, there are trade-offs among these nine principles. The Ontario Citizens' Assembly therefore identified three priority objectives that it felt an electoral system for Ontario should achieve:

1. **Voter choice:** voters should be able to indicate both their preferred candidate and their preferred party.
2. **Fair election results:** the number of seats a party wins should more closely reflect its share of the party vote.
3. **Strong local representation:** Each geographic area of the province should have at least one representative.

It was on the basis of these objectives and the principles that the Assembly recommended a Mixed Member Proportional System. Politicians, commentators and advocates for other electoral systems emphasized other objectives such as stable governments or proportional representation. Many voters in the referendum preferred strong accountability – i.e. a direct link between their vote and their representative – and not the creation of list members elected through the party vote on the proposed ballot.¹² (Voters were also concerned about the cost since the recommended MMP system required the addition of 22 seats to the Ontario legislature – although cost was not identified in any of the principles.)

3.2.2 Policy influence

The output of the exercise – a recommendation for a new electoral system for Ontario – was put directly to the Ontario electorate for decision in a referendum. In that sense, the output had the potential to influence policy. In this case, however, the decision-makers were the Ontario electorate and the majority did not accept the recommendation. I will discuss this issue further under Outcome Evaluation.

3.2.3 Task definition

The nature and scope of the exercise was clearly defined, primarily through the Select Committee of the Ontario Legislature that developed the terms of reference for the Citizens' Assembly. The scope was limited to assessing electoral systems, but did include the ability to change the size of the legislature, unlike the B.C. Citizens' Assembly. The terms of reference did not extend to issues such as civic education, the nomination of local candidates and the referendum itself, although the Citizens' Assembly commented on these issues in their report.¹³

A clear timeframe was also outlined, with a report due in May 2007 for a potential referendum during the provincial election in October 2007.

¹² The Report of the Chief Electoral Officer on the referendum indicated that the principal questions raised with Referendum Resource Officers across the province were: how much will it cost? and, who will the list members represent? (Elections Ontario, 2008, *Provincial Referendum on Electoral System Reform*, p. VI to 1). Fred Cutler and Patrick Fournier's opinion polling also indicated that cost and party lists proved to be liabilities (Cutler and Fournier).

¹³ Ontario Citizens' Assembly, 2007, *One Ballot, Two Votes*, 14-15.

3.3 Process Evaluation

The Ontario Citizens' Assembly consisted of two processes – an engagement process with the Assembly members, and a consultation process between the Assembly members and the Ontario public. Our evaluation looked at both processes but I will focus more in this paper on the engagement process and only comment briefly on the consultation process.

We developed success factors, objectives, indicators and targets at the outset and monitored achievement throughout the three phases of the Assembly – learning, consultation and deliberation. Information was collected through surveys of the Citizens' Assembly members after each meeting and after each phase, public surveys during the consultation phase, focus groups with members to discuss certain issues in more detail, observation of the Assembly meetings, documentation review, and interviews with key stakeholders.

Our evaluation of the engagement process concluded that it had been a success in all of the process criteria.¹⁴

3.3.1 Learning

Despite very little prior understanding of electoral systems and the underlying values, the Assembly members became knowledgeable within a relatively short period of time and their confidence in their ability greatly increased.

3.3.2 Dialogue

During the deliberation phase, dialogue was promoted through an exchange of ideas and opinions in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Members had an equal opportunity to participate. Anyone who witnessed the Assembly in action could not fail to be impressed by how focused the members were and how they framed the debate in terms of the agreed principles and objectives.

3.3.3 Decision making

The decisions to be taken were clear, the process was well structured and built up from one weekend to the next, and the Assembly members took ownership of the decisions that were made, including the final recommendation. The Chair as well as learning and support staff were considered by the Assembly members to be unbiased and neutral throughout the entire process.

3.3.4 Transparency

The whole Assembly process was undertaken in an open and transparent manner and was well documented for the benefit of future exercises of a similar nature.

3.3.5 Adequate Time and Resources

The Assembly faced major constraints in terms of the time that they had available to do their work, and to a more limited extent, the resources provided. Despite these constraints, however, they were able to complete their work on time and within budget. The initial budget for the Assembly was \$5 million and this was subsequently increased to \$6 million. To a large extent, this success was due to the leadership, organization, flexibility and responsiveness of the Secretariat team, including the Chair.

¹⁴ Institute On Governance, 2007.

3.3.6 Consultation Process

The Ontario Citizens' Assembly was required to consult with a broad cross section of Ontarians about the electoral system and to provide the public with the opportunity to make written and oral submissions. It therefore also provides an interesting case study in terms of consultation, although the purpose of the consultations was not well defined.

A variety of media and networks were used to communicate to the general public and specific groups (e.g. women, youth, Aboriginal peoples) about the Citizens' Assembly process and the opportunities to participate; consultation meetings were held throughout the province; four special outreach meetings were attended by people with low income, single parents, immigrants, people with disabilities, and their supporting organizations; and a separate Students' Assembly was supported involving youth aged 14 to 18 (which arrived at the same conclusion as the Citizens' Assembly).

To its credit, and unlike many other consultation exercises, the Citizens' Assembly tried to collect information not just on the number of participants but also the characteristics of those participating in terms of gender, age, geographic region, and specifically targeted groups. One interesting fact that emerged from the data was that participation by women as presenters and submitters was considerably lower than men – 23% versus 77%. Unfortunately, with the limited information available on other consultation exercises, we were not able to determine whether this is a normal trend in public consultations or whether it was linked to the issue under consideration. It does however point to the need to collect and monitor such data and to consider what outreach strategies might be needed to increase the involvement of women - or any other social, linguistic or demographic group that is considered to be important.

The views expressed by the public were both in favour of and opposed to electoral reform, with the balance in favour of reform. With the benefit of hindsight following the referendum, the public views expressed during the consultations were not representative of the views of the general electorate, the majority of whom were opposed to electoral reform.

I would argue however that rather than informing the Assembly about popular views, the principal benefits of the consultations were to increase awareness among the public of the Citizens' Assembly and to strengthen its legitimacy and transparency by providing an opportunity for anyone to express their views. The public consultations also had the unanticipated benefit of significantly increasing the Assembly members' confidence in their knowledge and ability to debate electoral reform issues – in a sense, providing an opportunity for Assembly members to test their knowledge against experts and interest groups.

3.4 *People Evaluation*

The Ontario Citizens' Assembly members were broadly representative of the Ontario public in terms of demographics, although they may have been more inclined towards change. They were also perceived as legitimate by the Ontario public.

3.4.1 Representative

The 103 Assembly members were randomly selected from among the approximately 8.4 million electors in Ontario. (The Chair was appointed.) The sample at various stages in the process was

designed to ensure that there was one member from each of the 103 provincial electoral districts, an equal number of men and women, and at least one member who self-identified as an Aboriginal person (i.e. First Nation, Métis or Inuit). Elected representatives and party officials or candidates were specifically excluded from becoming members.

The selection process was conducted by Elections Ontario. Initially, 123,938 electors were invited to participate and 7,033 or 5.67% responded positively. From this pool, Elections Ontario randomly selected 11 to 13 electors from each electoral district and invited them to attend a selection meeting in their area. After hearing more about the Assembly and what they would be required to do, prospective members confirmed their interest, and the names of the member and two alternates from each electoral district were drawn from a ballot box.¹⁵

The final distribution of the 103 members very closely reflected the age distribution data for Ontario, with the 25 to 39 years age group being the most underrepresented¹⁶ – probably because that is a critical time in terms of bringing up families and developing careers. The members were also diverse in terms of countries of origin, language, occupation, level of education and income¹⁷ – also these were not factors that were controlled during the selection process. A photo and short bio of each member was posted on the Citizens’ Assembly website, reinforcing the sense that they were “ordinary people”.

Members did not have strong views about how to change Ontario’s electoral system at the outset of the process, but about 46% were not satisfied with how the system worked – compared to about 25% of the general Ontario population. Over 90% of the members that responded to the first detailed survey thought that Ontario needed a change of electoral system.

An interesting question therefore is whether the Assembly members were more reform minded than the general public, and therefore more likely to recommend a change in the electoral system. This was an issue that was flagged by the Select Committee in their report although they did not make any suggestions about how to deal with it.¹⁸

In a situation where there is an element of self-selection, can this predisposition toward reform be avoided – in other words, if citizens are content with the current situation, are they less likely to volunteer to participate in an extensive exercise to review it? Is the solution to make participation compulsory - as is done with citizen participation on juries? How would this affect the commitment and enthusiasm of the members? These are all questions that could be explored further in future citizen engagement exercises.

3.4.2 Legitimacy

As previously stated, a key consideration is whether the general public views the Assembly as legitimate. Public opinion surveys done in Ontario during the referendum indicated that public views of the “ordinariness” of Assembly delegates and their acquired expertise had some

¹⁵ Elections Ontario, 2008, *Report on the Selection of the Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform*.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 17.

¹⁷ Ontario Citizens’ Assembly, 2007, *One Ballot, Two Votes*, p. 16.

¹⁸ Select Committee on Electoral Reform, 2005, 2.

influence on the decision about how to vote, although knowledge of MMP and the Ontario Citizens' Assembly was low and remained low throughout the referendum campaign.¹⁹

3.5 Outcome Evaluation

The proposed criteria to evaluate the outcome of a public participation exercise are: better decisions, better citizens, public acceptance of the output and outcome, and relevance. I'll deal with the easiest one first.

3.5.1 Better Citizens

There is no doubt that the Ontario Citizens' Assembly members benefitted from the process. Although they had to dedicate twelve weekends and untold numbers of hours on their own time to the work, for a relatively small amount of \$150 per day for each weekend session and for attendance at consultation hearings, when we asked them at the end of the process what impact the Assembly had had on different aspects of their life, an overwhelming majority indicated that they had benefited personally. The benefits cited included personal growth, broadened horizons, increased self-confidence, and better citizenship.²⁰

3.5.2 Better Decisions, Public Acceptance of the Output, and Relevance

In terms of the quality of the decision, the recommendation of the Ontario Citizens' Assembly was well thought through and detailed.

Because the ultimate decision by the electorate was to reject the recommendation, it is difficult to say whether it was the "right" decision. Public acceptance may have been influenced by other factors. The issue of electoral reform may not have been of major public interest.

Two possible explanations have been given as to why the referendum failed:

1. The public was not sufficiently informed about the Ontario Citizens' Assembly and knowledgeable about the alternative electoral system that was being recommended. Furthermore, had they been better informed, they would have voted in favour of the recommendation because it addressed their concerns and stated preferences.

Elections Ontario was responsible for running the referendum and conducting an impartial program of public education. They spent close to \$8 million on public education alone. According to their public opinion polling, knowledge and awareness of the referendum, the current electoral system, the proposed alternative, and the differences between the two systems increased substantially over the electoral period. By the time of the election in October 2007, 57% of eligible electors felt they knew enough or more than enough to vote in the referendum – an increase from 18% in June 2007.²¹

¹⁹ As reported by Cutler and Fournier, 2007.

²⁰ Institute On Governance, 2007, 21 and 66-67.

²¹ Elections Ontario, 2008, *Provincial Referendum on Electoral System Reform*, 40-41.

On the other hand, the survey conducted by the Institute for Social Research at York University from September 10 to October 9, 2007 and analyzed by Fred Cutler and Patrick Fournier from UBC and Université de Montreal respectively, indicated that “useful knowledge about the proposal was rare” among the Ontario electorate that said they knew something about MMP, and the more people knew about MMP, the more likely they were to support it. The survey also found that half the electorate knew nothing about the Citizens’ Assembly at the beginning and at the end of the referendum campaign, and the more they knew about the Assembly, the more likely they were to support its recommendation.²² Cutler and Fournier simulated the outcome of the referendum based on increased knowledge of all citizens of MMP and the Citizens’ Assembly, and concluded that the results would have been 63% in favour of MMP and 37% against – the mirror image of the actual outcome. There are however a lot of assumptions and variables at play in this simulation.

At this point in time, therefore, the “jury” is still out as to whether the Assembly’s recommendation would have been accepted by the public if more and better public education had been undertaken.

2. Electoral reform was not a sufficiently important issue for the public to decide to make a change, or, even worse, was not the right issue if the intention was to address the “democratic deficit”.

Although electoral reform was part of the Ontario Liberal Party election platform in 2003 and the subject of review in a number of provinces and nationally, less than one quarter of Ontarians were dissatisfied with the current first-past-the-post system. Some political commentators suggested that reform of the political system itself, rather than the electoral system, was needed.²³ Dissenting Progressive Conservative members of the Select Committee advocated that parliamentary reform be addressed first.²⁴

There was also no groundswell of support for change during the referendum. Organizations like Fair Vote, Equal Voice, and labour unions campaigned in favour of MMP but the amounts involved paled in comparison to what Elections Ontario and the Ontario Citizens’ Assembly had available. There were also campaigners against MMP, but they were fewer in number and less organized.²⁵

To these two explanations, I would also add a third that emerged under People Evaluation:

3. The Citizens’ Assembly was not reflective of the views of the general electorate and therefore their recommendation, while arrived at through a valid deliberative process, was not one that would have been arrived at if a more representative sample of the electorate had been convened to learn, debate and decide.

²² Cutler and Fournier, 2007.

²³ For example, Richard Gwyn, May 22, 2007.

²⁴ Select Committee on Electoral Reform, 2005, 91-93.

²⁵ Elections Ontario, *Registered Referendum Campaign Organizers in Ontario*, <http://www.elections.on.ca>

This explanation goes back to the question of what characteristics and values are important when selecting participants – for example, a predisposition for or against reform. It also raises the broader issue of whether the result of a deliberative exercise will always be the same if a different, but equally representative, group of people is involved.

The actual explanation is probably a combination of all three, and possibly other, explanations. Each explanation would lead to a different course of action in future such initiatives.

- insufficient public education could mean that more time and effort needs to be dedicated to that aspect in the future; or even that a referendum does not need to be held if one accepts that properly constituted citizens' assemblies represent what the views of the public would be if they were sufficiently informed.
- identifying the wrong issue or defining the problem in the wrong way could mean that the public should have been involved earlier in the problem definition rather than only in defining the solution.
- inadequate representation of different views or values could mean that more attention needs to be paid to those aspects during the selection of participants and might even require that participation be made compulsory.

4. Conclusion

In summary, the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform was a success in terms of the purpose that was defined for it and the process it followed but not in terms of the outcome. The outcome may have been affected by public knowledge of the Citizens' Assembly and its recommendation, the relevance of the issue that was being addressed, or the extent to which the Assembly members were representative of the broader Ontario electorate, particularly in terms of their support for electoral reform from the outset of the process. These views of Assembly members contrasted with the majority of the Ontario electorate who did not think Ontario's electoral system needed to be changed – both before and after the referendum campaign.

I have explored these questions using an evaluation framework comprised of five key elements and related criteria. The framework has proven to be useful in the analysis and in highlighting some key questions and issues that could be explored further. The analysis has been greatly assisted by the relative richness of data surrounding the Ontario Citizens' Assembly, its processes, its members and the referendum that resulted.

This evaluation framework could also be used in the design of a citizen engagement exercise, as it asks certain strategic questions – why, when, how and who? – within a particular context.

In the future, if more public participation initiatives undertook monitoring and evaluation within a more consistent and comprehensive framework, they could not only improve their performance and outcomes, but could also contribute to an expanding body of knowledge about what works and what doesn't. Different participation initiatives could be compared and contrasted in terms of achievement of the outcomes in relation to the purpose, process, and the people that are involved and the context within which they take place.

The most important point is that monitoring and evaluation of public participation needs to be planned into the process from the outset – otherwise the sponsor, the participants and the general public will not know whether objectives are being achieved, and best practices and lessons learned will not be captured for the benefit of future such exercises. The Ontario Citizens' Assembly Secretariat is to be credited with the foresight to ensure that this took place in their case.

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