

Referendum? Now what referendum would that be?

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TORONTO -- Nearly half of Ontarians say they know nothing about a proposal to change the way the province elects its politicians, but those who do know about it are likely to support it, according to a new poll.

However, based on British Columbia's similar efforts to bring about electoral reform in 2005, the Ontario referendum will probably fail, said Tim Woolstencroft of the Strategic Counsel, which conducted the poll for The Globe and Mail and CTV.

Mr. Woolstencroft said the lack of awareness is not surprising, even though the reforms would fundamentally alter how Ontarians have voted since before Confederation.

"This has been kind of under the radar in Ontario," he said. "It's an institutional issue that's pretty remote from the day-to-day lives for ordinary Ontarians.

The referendum, to be held in conjunction with the Oct. 10 provincial election, will ask voters if they want to replace the existing first-past-the-post system for electing legislators with a new system known as mixed-member proportional (MMP).

With less than three weeks to go, 47 per cent of those polled said they knew nothing at all about the proposal. Only 12 per cent said they knew a lot.

Half said they would vote against the proposed change, or remain undecided. Among decided voters, a slim majority, 54 per cent, said they would vote for it.

Those awareness levels are on par with what was happening a month before B.C.'s referendum failed in May, 2005. Throughout the B.C. campaign, awareness levels changed little and support for the new system remained relatively constant among decided voters. When it came to casting their ballot, people who were undecided voted against the move, the Strategic Counsel report said.

Given the B.C. experience, the report says, it is "unlikely" the Ontario referendum will pass, the report said. To become law, the referendum must be approved by 60 per cent of all votes cast across the province, along with at least half the votes in a minimum of 64 ridings.

"On referendum day many of these people will choose to keep the electoral system they are familiar with," the report states.

The Strategic Counsel poll found the proposed new voting system enjoys its highest support in Toronto and the 905 area-code suburbs around it (30 per cent Yes vs. 20 per cent No). NDP and Green Party supporters are also more in favour of the proposal (40 per cent and 42 per cent, respectively) than Liberal and Conservative supporters (25 per cent and 22 per cent, respectively).

Age is not as much a factor as gender, education and where one lives. Of those who support it, 30 per cent are males with postsecondary education who live in communities with populations of one million or more.

The survey of 850 Ontarians was conducted Sept. 13-16 and is considered accurate to within 3.4 percentage points, 95 per cent of the time.

Rick Anderson, chairman of a citizen's campaign in support of the alternative voting system, said yesterday he is "optimistic" voter interest will perk up in the 17 days left before Oct. 10. He rejected any suggestion that lack of public attention has doomed the proposal.

"I don't think the election campaign or the referendum campaign could be predicted by anyone at this point in time," said Mr. Anderson, chairman of Vote for MMP.

He praised Elections Ontario for its work in explaining the referendum process, but said the provincial government could have done more, much earlier on, to explain the choices. "A bit more neutral public education funded by the government authorities would have been a plus in terms of the voters getting up to speed on this," he said.

But a Liberal official, who asked not to be identified, said the government needs to guard against involving itself directly in the reform process. "It's not our responsibility to educate people on this," he said.

Opposition party officials blame Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty for initially leading the vanguard on electoral reform and then appearing to lose interest. The Premier promised to review the voting system in 2003, when he was Opposition Leader and in a mood to introduce sweeping reforms to the province's democratic procedures.

It would not be at all surprising, they say, for Mr. McGuinty to favour the status quo. The MMP system would bust up the monopoly of traditional political parties and allow for a legislature that more accurately reflects diverse views, they say.

"I think the McGuinty government is trying to create the illusion that they're in favour of electoral reform when, in fact, they're not," said NDP Leader Howard Hampton.

Among the three main party leaders, Mr. Hampton is the only one urging Ontarians to vote in favour of the MMP proposal, though he says that the public has not received enough information about it and that the 60-per-cent threshold will make it difficult to pass. Mr. McGuinty and Progressive Conservative Leader John Tory have remained neutral, although Mr. Tory has expressed concerns about the proposal to increase the number of members to 129 from the current 90.

John Hollins, president of Elections Ontario, said the agency has conducted its own poll which found that the number of voters who are aware of the referendum has climbed to 64 per cent from 18 per cent in June.

Elections Ontario has launched a \$6.8-million public education campaign about the referendum. It has mailed brochures to every household in the province, and run ads about the proposal. It has hired 107 information officers, one for each riding, and has set up a website to explain the proposal and referendum process (<http://www.yourbigdecision.ca>).

"It's resonating," Mr. Hollins said. "We're starting to get engaged."

Ontarians in the dark

As the Oct. 10 referendum approaches, close to half of Ontarians are unfamiliar with the mixed-member proportional system.

How much do Ontarians know about the proposed new system:

Nothing at all: 47%

A little: 41%

A lot: 12%

Voting intentions among the 50% who are decided voters:

Against proposed changes: 46%

For proposed changes: 54%

SOURCE: GLOBE AND MAIL/CTV/STRATEGIC COUNSEL POLL

THE PROS AND CONS OF EACH OPTION

THE EXISTING SYSTEM

Under Ontario's first-past-the-post system, each person casts a ballot for a candidate in his or her riding and the candidate who receives the most votes wins. The political party that wins the most ridings forms the government.

Strengths: The system often produces stable majority governments, and provides communities with strong local representation in a large and diverse province.

Weaknesses: The legislature does not always reflect the way Ontarians voted and a majority government only rarely wins a majority of the votes. The 2003 election is a case in point: the Liberals swept to power, winning 72 of the 103 ridings, but won only 46.5 per cent of the votes.

THE PROPOSED SYSTEM

Ontarians would cast two separate ballots vote under the mixed-member proportional system - MMP, for short - one for a local candidate in each of 90 expanded ridings across the province, and one for a political party. In addition to the 90 local MPPs, another 39 "list members" would come from lists of candidates chosen by political parties. If 40 per cent of the votes were cast for a particular political party, for example, that party would get 40 per cent of the seats. If a political party didn't have enough local members elected to match its share of the vote, it would be awarded additional seats from the 39 held by nominated members. The party with the largest numbers of seats would form the government.

Strengths: The number of seats held by a political party would roughly equal its share of the total votes for that party. Smaller parties could also gain seats, helping them emerge as a political force.

Weaknesses: The system could produce uncertainty as political rivals with opposing views form governing coalitions. For example, Belgium, which adopted proportional representation in 1981 and has 33 political parties, has gone without a government for more than three months. Critics also say that, with the list members, political parties would be able to stack their caucuses with loyalists who have no direct responsibility to voters.