

Covering Democracy:

The coverage of FPTP vs. MMP in the Ontario Referendum on Electoral Reform

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ABSTRACT

The ballot box is central to democracy. On election day in Canada voters are exhorted to make their way to church halls, school rooms and community centres to take a sheet of paper with a list of names in alphabetical order, stand behind a u-shaped piece of cardboard and make an “x” beside the candidate of their choice. When the votes are counted the candidate with the most votes takes his or her seat in the legislature.

In the past few years Canadians have begun to consider if this single member plurality system (SMP), also called “first-past-the-post”, is best suited to providing good governance. To engage the public in this debate, the mass media plays a critical role. How the media frames the electoral options for its readers, viewers and listeners, shapes the debate and ultimately impacts on the outcome. The way the media sets the agenda and the extent of the coverage will influence an electorate that is highly dependent on the media as it considers how to vote. Because referendums are rare in Canada, the role of the media is even more critical in informing voters about the issue.

On October 10, 2007, Ontario became the third province to hold a referendum on electoral reform. How did the media cover this referendum? Was the debate presented in a full and balanced manner that provided the voter with enough information to make a thoughtful choice? Until recently consideration of electoral reform in Canada has been the subject of academic papers and discussions with the occasional article in the opinion pages of newspapers debating the so-called “democratic deficit”. The new millennium brought with it a flurry of reports considering ways to reform the country’s electoral system. The reports completed so far have endorsed some form of proportional representation.

The Law Commission of Canada endorsed a mixed member proportional (MMP) representation of parties in the House of Commons. In British Columbia, a Citizens' Assembly recommended a different version of proportional representation, the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system. Prince Edward Island appointed a Commissioner to study electoral reform and his report recommended MMP. Like British Columbia, Ontario also established a Citizens' Assembly and it too proposed MMP, as did New Brunswick's Commission on Legislative Democracy.

In British Columbia, on May 17, 2005, the government added an electoral referendum to the provincial election asking voters to adopt STV or retain SMP. It required a super majority to pass. Voters gave STV 57 percent support and so the referendum narrowly failed. Later that year, on November 28, in Prince Edward Island, a stand-alone referendum on SMP versus MMP resulted in voters supporting SMP 64 per cent to 36 per cent.

In Ontario the Liberal government, led by Dalton McGuinty, fulfilled an election campaign promise by creating a Citizens' Assembly on electoral reform. It submitted its Report on May 15, 2007. The proposal called for 90 locally elected members using SMP and 39 list members "elected province wide through the party vote side of the ballot."¹ The combination of traditionally elected and list elected members would add a total of 22 seats to the legislature.² "A party must have clear support – at least three per cent of the party vote across the province – for candidates from its list to be elected to the legislature."³ The Citizens' Assembly pointed out that the last majority government in

¹ Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, "One Ballot, Two Votes: A new way to vote in Ontario," May 15, 2007, pg. 2.

² The Harris Government cut the number of seats in Ontario from 130.

³ Ibid, pg. 3.

Ontario elected by a majority of voter support was back in 1937. The Assembly's Report summed up the case for MMP arguing that to achieve voter choice, fair election results and strong local representation "a Mixed Member Proportional system, designed specifically for Ontario, does the best job."⁴ The Report conceded "in Mixed Member Proportional systems, *coalition majority governments* are the most common."⁵ Its assessment was that jurisdictions outside Canada that adopted MMP are stable.

After the Ontario Citizen's Assembly Report was tabled the government announced that a referendum would be held in conjunction with the provincial election on October 10, 2007. In putting electoral reform before the voters the government of Ontario put in a double threshold for adoption. To win, MMP would have to get at least 60 per cent of the votes cast and be approved by a majority of voters in at least 60 per cent of electoral districts.⁶ The ballot question was not a yes/no question; instead it offered the voter a choice.

Which electoral system should Ontario use to elect members to the Provincial Legislature?

The existing electoral system (First-Past-the-Post).

The alternate electoral system proposed by the Citizens' Assembly (Mixed Member Proportional).

⁴ Ibid, pg.5.

⁵ Ibid. pg. 11. The italics are from the Report.

⁶ The threshold provision was a condition in the B.C. referendum too.

Donna Dasko, Senior Vice President of Environics Research, believes the “referendum wording made a difference”⁷ by not offering a simple yes/no question on MMP. The first choice presented to voters was to take the safe route and make no change. Referendums are rare in Ontario. The last provincial referendum was in 1924 on prohibition. So Ontarians have little experience with referendums and the modern media has never covered a provincial referendum.

The Ontario election campaign formally began on September 10. This was less than four months after the Citizens’ Assembly issued its report on electoral reform. Before the campaign began the two major parties, the Liberals and Conservatives and their respective leaders, Premier Dalton McGuinty and John Tory, announced that they would not be campaigning for or against MMP. McGuinty opted to stay neutral and Tory indicated that he did not support MMP. The NDP and its leader, Howard Hampton, as well as the Green Party and its leader, Frank De Jong, announced they were in favour of MMP. The Ontario Government allocated \$6.8 million for what it called a neutral information campaign about the choice. The campaign explained the options, SMP or MMP, through newspaper ads, a web site and some broadcast media advertising.

The lack of media coverage of the Citizens’ Assembly process and the Ontario Government’s decision to limit its promotion of the new choice being advocated by the Citizens’ Assembly meant that as the provincial election drew near the voter’s awareness of the referendum was limited or non-existent. Ontarians have not paid much attention to their electoral system. But do they accept the current system? One pollster, Dr. Keith Neuman, Vice President at Environics, generalizing about Canadians, says they, “are

⁷ Dasko, Donna, Senior Vice-President, Environics, Toronto, personal email exchange, November 29, 2007.

comfortable with the basic system. There is no sense of frustration and how elections are held is not a big issue.”⁸ An Environics poll, taken for CBC News in the spring of 2004, found that 63 per cent of Ontarians said they wanted to “keep the electoral system we have, and 34 per cent favoured changing “the way we elect governments.”⁹

SMP is a mature system with the rules of the political game clearly defined. The advantages and disadvantages are also well known. Political parties, lobbyists, and interest groups know the system and have an interest in maintaining the status quo. And yet the election results in Ontario over the past decades invites a debate about the pros and cons of SMP versus MMP. In most Ontario elections the winning party formed a majority with less than a majority of the vote. Challenging Canada’s voting system challenges the civic education of Canadians.

If there is any consistency between voting behavior in referendums and elections, it is likely to be found in people’s need, when called on to vote, to ‘understand’ and take positions on complex issues with the minimum of effort and their urge also to harmonize their choices – that is, to reduce cognitive dissonance.¹⁰

If the system is broken, if it needs to be reformed to work, if how the country and provinces are run is put in doubt, is the sense of democracy Canadians hold also challenged? How would the media rise to the challenge of covering a referendum

⁸ Neuman, Keith, personal interview. November 23, 2007.

⁹ CBC News/Environics poll, May 12-18, 2004.

<http://www.cbc.ca/canadavotes2004/thepolls/democracypoll.html>. The question is in the federal context but the sample size is big enough to validate a break out for Ontario: The electoral system in this country involves electing members of parliament from single-member ridings. Other countries have different systems such as proportional representation or direct election for the head of government. Do you think this country should change the way we elect governments or keep the electoral system we now have?

¹⁰ Aimer, Peter and Raymond Miller, “Partisanship and principle: Voters and the New Zealand electoral referendum of 1993”, *European Journal of Political Research*, 41, 2002, pg. 795.

campaign? Thomas Nelson (et al) assessed the importance of agenda setting and priming and “how media coverage on an issue per se can influence opinion”¹¹

In this paper, I will review the coverage as it applies to agenda setting and priming. Examining how the coverage was framed will be the central objective of the paper. The media can “frequently rely on frames to organize the presentation of messages”¹² and “frames serve as bridges between elite discourse about a problem or issue and popular comprehension of that issue.”¹³

Because the Citizens’ Assembly Report on electoral reform was not widely reported on when it was tabled in May of 2007, how the media subsequently framed this complicated reform of the democratic process would be central to the understanding the voter would take into the polling booth. “Frames tell people how to weight the often conflicting considerations that enter into everyday political deliberations.”¹⁴ The referendum in Ontario on October 10 was no “everyday” political decision.

For this study of the coverage of the Ontario Referendum, I chose as my sample period September 24, 2007 to October 10, 2007. I reviewed the coverage in the Ontario edition of the *Globe and Mail*, often referred to as Canada’s national newspaper, the Ontario edition of the *Toronto Star*, an independently owned Toronto newspaper, and the Ottawa edition of the *Ottawa Citizen*, a CanWest newspaper. I also reviewed the coverage of two supper-hour television news programs, CTV Toronto, a CTV affiliate, and CBOT News in Ottawa, a CBC station. I monitored each station’s web re-broadcast of the six o’clock news Monday – Friday between September 24 and October 10.

¹¹ Nelson, Thomas and Zoe Oxley, Rosalee Clawson, “Toward a psychology of framing effects”, *Political Behavior*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 1997. pg. 222.

¹² Ibid, pg. 223.

¹³ Ibid, pg. 224.

¹⁴ Ibid, pg 226.

Because CBC does not air local news on Saturday and Sunday I did not include CTV Toronto's weekend coverage.

For the newspaper analysis I will present total coverage analysis as well as look separately at news coverage and opinion coverage. The opinion coverage will include columns, opinion pieces and editorials. My hypothesis is that because this was a referendum that gave Ontario voters the opportunity to vote for or against a fundamental change in how the province is governed the media should have provided daily, significant, balanced coverage of the issues surrounding the referendum proposal.

Reviewing the coverage of this referendum is a unique opportunity to look at one question, a fundamental electoral reform question, and assess how the media framed the issue for its readers and viewers. Because the leaders of the three largest parties, the Liberals, the Conservatives and the NDP, chose not to make the referendum a central issue in their campaigns we can assess if the media "are passive conveyors of the gospels politicians choose to preach or are they independent proselytizers for paths to social and political salvation?"¹⁵ It allows for an assessment of the media in 2007 as a public space for a discussion of the merits, pro and con, of SMP versus MMP. Some suggest the media as a "public space becomes organized on the basis of corporate money and power rather than public discussion."¹⁶ As a new, complicated and little understood initiative, the referendum offered the media an opportunity to engage in civic journalism.

¹⁵ Soderlund, Walter, and Walter Romanow, Donald Briggs, Ronald Wagenberg, *Media and Elections in Canada*, (Toronto, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984) pg. 1.

¹⁶ Crossley, Nick, and John Michael Roberts, *After Habermas: New perspectives on the Public Sphere*, (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2004) pg. 118.

Journalism is our modern cartography. It creates a map for citizens to map society. That is its utility and its economic reason for being. This concept of cartography helps clarify the question of what journalism has a responsibility to cover.¹⁷

Gertrude Robinson in her introduction to *Constructing the Quebec Referendum* says “democratic theory legitimates four groups of actors as players on the political stage: politicians, journalists, experts and ‘people-in-the-street’. All of their voices are represented in the news narrative.”¹⁸ I have already noted that the key political leaders in Ontario opted not to be “players on the political stage” during the referendum campaign. Did the media accept its role and present a coherent “news narrative” on electoral reform during the last 17 days of the Ontario referendum campaign? Through its pages and newscasts, did it give voice to politicians, experts and the public?

The way the media primes and frames issues are considered important in communication theory.

Messages may change attitudes by *adding information* to an individual’s stockpile of consideration about the issue (belief change), by making particular considerations temporarily more *accessible* (priming), or by altering the *weight* of particular considerations (framing).¹⁹

So overall how did the sampled media cover the referendum? The *Globe and Mail* made no mention of the referendum on 9 days of the 17 days monitored, the *Ottawa Citizen* had 8 days with no coverage and the *Toronto Star* 4 days. CTV Toronto and CBOT Ottawa

¹⁷ Kovach, Bill and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism*, (New York, Three Rivers Press, 2007) pg. 208.

¹⁸ Robinson, Gertrude, *Constructing the Quebec Referendum: French and English Media Voices*, (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1988) pg. 22.

¹⁹ Nelson, et al, *Toward a Psychology of Framing Effects*, pg. 236.

had one full report each during this period. The overall coverage was thus not primed in a way that would engage the reader or viewer of daily news.

The media often tout themselves as a quasi-public service, acting in the interests of an absent public by scrutinizing legislative activity...this means that debate over voting-system reform will also be carried out largely in the media, and that a good deal of what the public comes to know about it...will be influenced by the media.²⁰

A look at the coverage on Saturday, October 6, demonstrates the lack of news coverage. None of the papers provided news coverage on the issue and only one published a column that day.²¹ This news black hole was surprising because it came on the Saturday before the referendum, and it was also the day of the three newspapers' largest edition of the week, with extra sections devoted to in-depth coverage of issues. Saturday newspapers are loaded down with advertisements of all kinds and perhaps this lack of coverage supports the view that "we are seeing for the first time the rise of market-based journalism increasingly divorced from the idea of civic responsibility."²²

For the more in depth analysis I will look at how each newspaper and the two TV newscasts covered the referendum.

The *Toronto Star* provided the most coverage.

<u>News</u>	<u>Opinion</u>	<u>Editorial</u>	<u>Column</u>	<u>Total</u>
10	4	2	3	19

²⁰ Pilon, Dennis, *The Politics of Voting: Reforming Canada's Electoral System*, (Toronto, Emond Montgomery Publications, 2007) pg. 169.

²¹ The Ottawa Citizen did publish one column on the referendum on Oct. 6.

²² Kovach and Rosensteel, *The Elements of Journalism*, pg. 27.

The *Toronto Star* referred to the referendum twice on page one. On Sunday, October 7, under the heading “Power of the little people” the *Star* wrote: “the one ballot two votes proposal known as MMP came from 103 randomly selected Ontarians. And voting “yes” could mean a plurality of little parties.” This ‘tease’ sent readers to the Ideas section for the full story. Of the eight other news stories, four are efforts to explain the choice for voters. Only one story is based on a referendum campaign event. That is a report on October 3, about a debate on the issue at the University of Toronto. The headline read “NDP seen as big MMP beneficiary”, and the article reported the views of a former Conservative cabinet minister Charles Harnick, saying the NDP would “election after election, hold the balance of power.” One piece was a report on a poll. There was a report on the questions a 15-year old student had about the two options and a report on the “other ballot” asked: “Will we pick a new system?”

On voting day the *Star* asked “Are voters ready to throw system out?” Joe Angoliano, the media director of No MMP got the last word on the news pages of the *Star*: “It’s going to be a loss and they’re not going to get 50 per cent.” The news pages of the *Star* did not cover the referendum campaign. Only one event, the debate at the University of Toronto, was assigned. Other coverage is based on polls, interviews with stakeholders from both sides and reports to explain the referendum proposal. The news pieces framed the referendum as something many Ontarians don’t understand. A second frame was that a victory for MMP meant that small parties would be able to control the political system.

The *Toronto Star* wrote two editorials on the referendum. The editorial on September 30 framed the fear of minority control. “Who knows what obnoxious deal

premiers might have to be forced to consider, to prevent their weak governments from collapsing?” Then, the day before the vote, in a headlined editorial “Electoral reform fraught with risk” asked: “And how far would weak premiers go, making obnoxious deals to keep their struggling governments in power?” The arguments and wording against MMP are repeated throughout the two *Star* editorials including the final sentences. “Why strain to ‘fix’ what isn’t broken?” (September 30) and “Our system does not need a ‘fix’ because it isn’t broken.” (October 9).

The *Toronto Star* published three full columns on MMP. Its Queens Park columnist, Ian Urquhart, wrote two. In the first column (September 26) he worried about the lack of knowledge amongst the electorate: “So, by and large, the voters will be making their referendum choice out of ignorance.” In his next column, two days later, under the headline, “Here’s why I’m voting against MMP”, Urquhart reviewed MMP in New Zealand focusing not on the pros and cons of the system but on the fact that New Zealand now has eight parties in its Parliament. “One could easily envisage the emergence of parties based on ethnicity or on geography (a Toronto secessionist party, say, or a northern party)”. There were no *Star* columns on the referendum after September 28.²³

The *Star* published four opinion pieces. On September 27, Estella Cohen, a former member of the *Star*’s Community Editorial Board, framed her piece on the complexity of the issue, saying “I have found most of the information available to be far too academic or just plain confusing.”²⁴ On October 5 the *Star* placed “yes” and “no”

²³ *Star* columnist Haroon Siddiqui mentions MMP in one paragraph at the end of his column on October 7. He supports MMP but here too the minority frame is mentioned. “The danger of minority governments is surely overstated.”

²⁴ Note: Cohen is the only woman to write a column on MMP in this analysis.

pieces side by side. Larry Gordon, the campaign manager for the Vote for MMP, argued the “yes” position and Brian Henry, described as a Toronto writer and editor, wrote for the “no” side. The final piece was by Dennis Pilon, author of *The Politics of Voting*. His article supported MMP.

The *Ottawa Citizen* published a total of 14 pieces on the referendum.

<u>News</u>	<u>Opinion</u>	<u>Editorial</u>	<u>Columns</u>	<u>Total</u>
5	2	1	6	14

The first page one mention in the *Citizen* promoted a column on Sunday, September 30 with the bolded headline, “Why proportional representation would be a disaster”. The second came on October 10 as part of the paper’s voting day story. The *Citizen* published one long “explainer” piece (September 25) that looked at “10 different angles” starting with “simplicity” and as with most of the media coverage, the MMP option is framed as more “complex” than the first-past-the-post system. The piece promised to “look at the merits and demerits of the two systems” but in fact on “voter choice” and “diversity” it only offered the MMP position.

The *Citizen* reported on two referendum campaign events. An eight-paragraph report about a meeting in Ottawa published on September 25 headlined “Dissenter says MMP would hurt democracy.” It quoted extensively “a former Ontario bureaucrat”, Charles Ficner, saying MMP would put “more power in the hands of political parties”. In paragraph six the report said Mr. Ficner “was the lone dissenting voice at an event dominated by proponents of the proposed system,” but paid little attention to the

arguments for MMP. An article on October 4 reported on a news conference by a group of prominent politicians supporting MMP. According to the report filed from Toronto, former Ontario NDP premier Bob Rae, former federal NDP leader Ed Broadbent and Conservative Senator Hugh Segal blamed “Elections Ontario and the media for failing to properly inform the public about the province’s referendum.” The last news piece in the *Citizen* broke out an Angus Reid poll. After the main headline “First-past-the-post system ahead by a nose,” the smaller sub-headline said: “Proposed electoral changes favoured by just 24%, poll shows.”

The *Ottawa Citizen* published its editorial on election day. The *Citizen* places editorials in the first section of the paper and in the City section. It consigned the referendum editorial to the City section and some readers would have read the editorial after they had already voted. The editorial opposed MMP and adopted the “fear of minority” frame. It wrote that MMP “allows fringe or single-issue groups to hijack the political process... Could a neo-Nazi party get three per cent? Perhaps not, but there are other single issue ethnic or demographic groups that could.”

On October 10 the *Citizen* published its only opinion piece. With the campaign over and voters on their way to the polls, the *Citizen* published a long piece by two York University professors titled, “How MMP really works: The German example shows that the worst fears about Ontario’s proposed mixed-member proportional voting system are ill-founded.”

In the two weeks leading up to the vote the *Citizen* published six columns on MMP – all of them opposed to the initiative. Three of the columns were devoted to the issue and three had references to the vote on electoral reform. The *Citizen* columnists

were the most strident in their opposition to MMP. In a column headlined, “Fearing the Fringe”, David Warren focused first on the power fringe parties would have under MMP. Providing no evidence, Warren stated: “Across Europe, in Israel and beyond, wherever it has been introduced, government have become less accountable to the public.” He went on to state; “Proportional representation is disastrous” and it “creates nearly inevitable minority government...saves each party from having (to) allow its most repulsive members to campaign.” Warren offered no context and no specific examples, only saying the coalitions in Europe resulting from MMP “is a powerful encouragement to corruption as we’ve seen across Europe.” Mark Sutcliffe’s column on October 6 is headlined “10 reasons to say no to MMP”.

The *Globe and Mail* published 11 pieces on the referendum.

<u>News</u>	<u>Opinion</u>	<u>Editorial</u>	<u>Column</u>	<u>Total</u>
4	3	1	3	11

The *Globe* placed one story on page one on October 3. A week before the vote the report, placed at the bottom of the page, was headlined: “Vote a key test for democratic reform.” The report led with the MMP position but the piece was framed around the minority risk that with MMP there would “not have been a majority government for the past two decades, if not the past 50 years.” On the inside page a longer report had an explainer section and included reporting from people on both sides out campaigning on the referendum issue. This was the only *Globe* report based on the

campaign. The *Globe* reported on one poll with the headline, “Referendum? Now what referendum would that be?” (September 24). It reported a Strategic Counsel poll that found almost half of Ontarians did not know anything about MMP. Again there was a section explaining “the pros and cons of each option”. The day before the election, a second poll story, again from Strategic Counsel was headlined, “More voters understand proposed electoral changes, but fewer support them.”

The *Globe* framed its editorial (October 4) around the lack of knowledge of Ontarians who “are poorly informed about the choice before them” and the minority government frame that MMP “all but ensures perpetual minority government.”

On October 5 two *Globe* columnists focused on MMP. Rick Salutin supported MMP. This column was his second on the issue and responded to readers. He summed up with his opinion that MMP “addresses our pitifully undemocratic process but doesn’t take us very far toward true democracy.” Jeffrey Simpson, also on October 5, opposed MMP. His approach was the most measured of all the columnists surveyed. He gave the fullest explanation of how MMP works in Germany and New Zealand. But he framed his case like so much of the coverage around the prospect of minority government and the “disproportional influence” of small parties. He concluded that the “existing system, on balance, wins the tests of efficiency, accountability and stability.”

The *Globe* published three opinion pieces. Gordon Gibson compared the proposals in British Columbia with Ontario. He concluded: “I know my view. The current system, with all its faults, is superior to MMP.” Patrick Monahan and Finn Poschmann clearly supported the current, first-past-the-post system, saying it “better matches the Canadian electorate’s needs.” Tom Kent supported MMP writing: “By

endorsing a two-vote electoral system, we can move forward toward a future of constructive democratic government.”

On television, CTV Toronto and CBOT Ottawa each broadcast one full report, both on October 9, on the referendum. CTV Toronto mentioned the referendum in a report on September 28 about the fringe parties in the election. After reporting on fringe parties like the Libertarians, the Freedom Party and the Family Coalition Party, campaign reporter Paul Bliss, in an on camera conclusion said:

You may have heard about the referendum we're having this time around in the election. If Ontario chooses a new proportional representation system, a lot of these so-called fringe parties will actually have members and seats.

This report, like much of the newspaper reporting, framed the referendum as an opportunity for fringe parties to win seats, but neglected to report that under the MMP proposal a party needs three per cent of the total votes cast to gain a seat in the legislature. The reports on October 9 highlighted another of the frames the newspapers used: the lack of knowledge about the referendum. CTV Toronto featured one of the “randomly chosen” members of the Citizens’ Assembly. The report focused on her frustration that the day before the vote voters were still “saying referendum...what referendum?”

CBOT ran a report from Toronto featuring voters who know little about the referendum. This report had a woman in the beginning saying, “I’ve seen it but I don’t know what it stands for.” Later, in the same report, the reporter said “but even those people who do know what MMP is still have questions.” The report now went back to the same woman who at the beginning knew nothing. “But I just don’t know how it is

going to work.” Both reports highlighted that the Ontario government spent money to advertise the referendum. CTV Toronto reported that \$8.3 million was spent and the CBOT reported the number used in newspapers, \$6.8 million. Both reports pointed out the referendum needed 60 per cent of the popular vote to be adopted.

The TV coverage of the referendum does suggest that the public sphere on television news has led to “a regressive ‘dumbing down’ of the level of public debate as editors, pursuing new and larger markets, have been inclined to play to the lowest common denominator.”²⁵ The majority of Canadians rely on television for news and “a little positive TV exposure can go a long way in furthering a cause, while negative TV coverage can really hurt it.”²⁶ The TV coverage was very limited and framed the issue as confusing. This combination left viewers uninformed and disengaged about the referendum and the newscasts of both stations did not engage in any journalism to inform viewers of the issues around electoral reform.

Front-page coverage in the three newspapers provided little information, with very limited accessibility and three of the four referendum references on page one were framed in a way that denigrated the MMP proposal. Philip Seib, a Professor of Journalism at Marquette University, notes: “Perhaps the greatest power held by political journalists is their authority to decide what to cover and what to ignore.”²⁷ The page one editors of all three papers chose to virtually ignore the referendum.

On the inside pages there were a total of 17 news stories. Three reported on polls taken about views on proportional representation. Seven of the stories either explained

²⁵ Crossley and Roberts, *After Habermas* pg. 6.

²⁶ Pilon, *The Politics of Voting*, pg 171.

²⁷ Seib, Philip, *Campaigns and Conscience: The Ethics of Political Journalism*, (Westport, Connecticut, Praeger, 1994) pg. 31.

the pros and cons of MMP versus SMP or reported on the need to get voters informed of the referendum. For example on September 26, the *Toronto Star* headlined a story; “Referendum awareness on the rise, official says”. The next day, it headlined a second story; “Rush is on to get word out about MMP”. Both articles framed the referendum as something many Ontarians don’t understand. In fact seven, almost half, of the news pieces highlighted the lack of knowledge by voters on how MMP works and the need to better educate voters before October 10. The number of stories highlighting lack of knowledge was actually higher because the poll result stories focused on this as well. Seven news stories pointed out that the Ontario government funded a \$6.8 million voter information campaign.

There are a number of factors that “may influence how journalists frame a given issue: social norms and values, organizational pressures and constraints, pressures of interest groups, journalistic routines, and ideological or political orientations of journalists.”²⁸ In their news coverage the newspapers framed the coverage around the likelihood that adopting MMP would result in minority government giving small parties too much power. Seven of the news reports highlighted the issue of minority government and six referred to small or “fringe” parties gaining new power and influence. For example, the *Globe and Mail* explainer piece on October 4 led with the critics of MMP and the issue of “never-ending minority governments in which fringe parties hold the balance of power”.

Stability is one of the values of Canadian democracy and the interests of the two leading political parties in Ontario is for the status quo, or SMP, over MMP. “The only persons who can change the electoral system are those who benefit from not changing

²⁸ Scheufele, Dietram, “Framing as a Theory of Media Effects”, *Journal of Communication*, 1999, pg. 109.

it”.²⁹ Political journalists have a comfort with the known SMP system. It is, after all, the only one they have covered in their careers. In the news coverage of the referendum, MMP was given the first mention in 6 of the reports and SMP in 4. The most cited frame in favour of MMP was fairness. Seven reports explained the pros and cons of the two systems highlighted fairness. The *Ottawa Citizen* on September 25 in a primer on the vote characterized fairness as “MPP’s big claim to fame” and on October 10 reported:

Fundamentally, MMP is designed to ensure that representation in the legislature reflects a party’s level of electoral support. The system with which Ontarians are familiar, first past the post, manifestly fails to do that.

The *Toronto Star* on October 4 reported, “advocates say MMP would more accurately reflect voters’ intentions.”

During the last 17 days of the referendum campaign, 12 newspaper columnists made a reference to the referendum. In most cases the full column was given over to the issue but in four there was only a mention of the referendum. All three newspapers wrote editorials and nine opinion pieces appeared. The opinion pieces were more balanced. Five argued in favour of MMP and four supported SMP. A closer look at the opinion pages of the newspapers showed similarities with the news pages. As I’ve pointed out the dominant frames on the news pages were minority government, more powerful fringe parties, lack of knowledge and that MMP was fairer. Ten of the columns and opinion pieces addressed the question of minority government and nine raised concerns about fringe parties gaining too much power. Lack of knowledge about the proposed system

²⁹ Loenen, Nick, *Citizenship and Democracy: A case for proportional representation*, (Toronto, Dundurn Press, 1997) pg. 139.

was taken up in five of the pieces while six backed the position that under MMP the results were fairer.

In the content analysis undertaken here, the media did not provide daily, significant, balanced coverage of the issues surrounding the referendum proposal. The media in Ontario provided only minimal news coverage. By and large the newspapers did not cover the day-to-day electoral referendum campaign. The *Toronto Star* and *Ottawa Citizen* each covered one such meeting and the *Globe* assigned a reporter to talk to campaigners from both sides.

The two TV newscasts opted to virtually ignore the issue and provided coverage framed on the lack of knowledge of the referendum. The notion of civic journalism played no role in the TV coverage and only a limited role in the press. Over all the media presented no sense that there was an on-going daily campaign to debate the province's electoral system. When the media referred to the referendum it was usually through the frame that the voter didn't have enough knowledge to make an informed decision and that MMP would lead to more fringe parties and minority governments.

In the majority of news, columns and editorial coverage this was all seen as a bad thing for Ontario. Only a handful of opinion pieces presented the other side, most taking on the minority government issue trying to allay the concerns presented in all of the other coverage. The debate was framed in four key ways; MMP would mean perpetual minority government, with MMP fringe parties would hold the balance of power, lack of knowledge about the MMP option, and finally, in favour of MMP, that it was a fairer system. Sometimes the fairer system argument was framed in quotations and qualifiers.³⁰

³⁰ Both Toronto Star editorials put quotations around "fairer".

The three newspapers published editorials opposed to MMP. These strong editorial positions keyed on the issue that minority government is not a good thing for Ontario. The potential for increased power for small parties in tandem with the risk of minority government added fuel to the anti-MMP arguments. A year earlier, in a federal election, Canada elected a minority government. While the federal Canadian scene was not addressed it could be that the reality of minority government in Ottawa influenced the editorial positions that were taken.

So why did the media opt to not provide thorough coverage? It is possible, as the *Globe and Mail* editorial suggested, that holding the referendum in conjunction with the general provincial election meant “it would be overshadowed by the political battle between Mr. McGuinty and Mr. Tory?” The newspapers did cover the general election campaign every day and the TV newscasts monitored also gave daily coverage to the election. A stand-alone referendum on electoral reform might have resulted in more media attention.

On election day 63 per cent voted for SMP and 37 per cent voted for MMP. It is worth noting that this is identical to the results of the CBC/Enviroics poll in May of 2004. The result suggests that indeed “people’s information processing and interpretation are influenced by preexisting meaning structures and schemas”³¹ The poll showed that “Ontarians were pleased with what they had.”³² If “selective scanners use mass media only to seek information relevant to them” then a majority of Ontario voters were not even looking for news on electoral reform. They had already decided that the existing system worked well enough and so “does the individual framing of issues influence

³¹ Scheufele, Dietram, “Framing as a Theory of Media Effects,” pg. 105.

³² Dasko, Donna, personal email exchange, November 29, 2007.

evaluations of issues of political actors?”³³ If there was no great clamour in Ontario for electoral reform, if the process was only fulfilling an election campaign promise, then did the media adopt the frame of the majority of Ontario voters? “A common assumption is that elites enjoy considerable leeway in using frames to influence and manipulate citizens’ opinions.”³⁴

The media analyzed in this survey provided limited priming, agenda setting and used frames that opposed MMP. This lack of coverage, especially in television but also in newspapers, represented an abdication of public coverage, debate and coverage of the referendum. While it is arguable that “Ontarians were pleased with what they had,”³⁵ there was only a very limited debate in the media about the choice before them.

By absenting itself from in-depth, daily, prominent coverage the media chose not to make the referendum part of the news agenda. If it is true that “most Canadians have never considered that our voting system could be other than what it is”,³⁶ was there an obligation to provide more coverage? The analysis clearly shows that the media supported the status quo and that in this case “mainstream journalism, despite its assertions of objectivity and independence, is fully implicated in legitimizing the established relations of power within liberal-democratic capitalism.”³⁷ One of the main frames presented by the media, and the only frame delivered by TV news, was that Ontarians did not know enough about MMP to make an informed choice. And yet this analysis demonstrates that the media took on very little responsibility for informing

³³ Scheufele, pg 108.

³⁴ Druckman, James, “On the Limits of Framing Effects: Who Can Frame?” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 63, No. 4, 2001, pg.1044.

³⁵ Dasko, Donna, personal email exchange, November 29, 2007.

³⁶ Loenen, Nick, *Citizenship and Democracy*, pg. 25.

³⁷ Hackett, Robert and Yuezhi Zhao, *Sustaining Democracy? Journalism and the Politics of Objectivity* (Toronto, Garamond Press, 1998) pg. 145.

citizens about a possible change to a core democracy tenet; the way we elect our government. “Lack of knowledge” was repeatedly used as a reason for why Ontarians were going to vote against the initiative. The media used this frame more than any other. Yet, the media did not take on the challenge to inform the electorate of the issues before them on this rare opportunity to give voters the information needed to make an informed choice. Perhaps the Environics poll reflected the end result because voters were as poorly informed about the issue on the day of the referendum as when the survey was taken two years earlier.

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