**A Simply Transformative View of the Single-Transferable Vote:
Looking Through a Gendered Lens at Electoral Reform in British Columbia**

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Abstract: In 2009, British Columbians voted for the second time on the adoption of a new electoral system, the single-transferable vote (STV), as proposed by the Province's own Citizens' Assembly on electoral reform. The failure of the BC-STV to pass in this referendum generated much discussion on electoral reform, yet little research attention has been devoted to the role of gender in this process. This paper highlights the connections that can be drawn between the BC-STV and feminist studies, analyzing how electoral reform may influence gender parity in the Province's legislative assembly and how gender, in turn, influenced BC's electoral reform deliberations. The first section argues that electoral reform would have significantly improved gender parity in BC's legislative assembly. This conclusion is based upon an analysis of BC's political culture in connection with three theoretical advantages of the STV system: its use of multi-member districts, its compatibility with affirmative action initiatives, and its susceptibility to the so-called "contagion effect." The second section of this paper explores how gender dynamics influenced the ability of various "gendered actors" to influence the BC Citizens' Assembly (BCCA). Female participants, feminist activists, and male staff members each enjoyed differing levels of influence that can be traced back to pre-existing gender inequalities. This work thereby demonstrates that an application of feminist theory can significantly enrich the study of electoral reform movements, both in British Columbia and elsewhere.

Key terms: gender; patriarchy; single-transferable vote; single member plurality

Definitions:

Gender: The attributes of "maleness" or "femaleness" as they are ascribed by society to individuals of the male or female sex, respectively.

Patriarchy: A hierarchical system of social organization in which males and masculine qualities tend to be favored and in which males enjoy greater opportunities for social and economic advancement than females.

Single-transferable vote: An electoral system currently used to differing degrees in countries like Scotland, Malta, and Australia, under which voters rank several candidates in each riding in order of preference. Once selected candidates have obtained enough votes to reach a pre-set threshold, any excess votes are "transferred" to the voter's next preference.

Single member plurality: An electoral system, currently in use in British Columbia, under which each electoral district elects a single candidate to sit in the legislature. This candidate must win more votes than any other candidate in the same riding in order to be elected.

Introduction

In 2003, the Liberal government of British Columbia (BC) appointed a British Columbia Citizens' Assembly (BCCA) on electoral reform, charged with the mandate of proposing a new electoral system for the province[1]. After a year-long process of learning and deliberation, the BCCA decided to propose a proportional representation (PR) system, which it christened the "BC-STV." To the consternation of many BCCA members, voters rejected the BC-STV in two province-wide referenda, held in 2004 and 2009[2]. Scholars have since been fascinated firstly by the role of the citizens' assembly as a democratic actor and secondly by the disappointingly low level of public support for electoral reform in BC (Seidle, 2007; Tanguay, 2007; Warren & Pearse, 2008). The connection between the BC-STV and gender, however, has received surprisingly little attention in scholarly research (A. Lang, personal communication, November 9, 2009). This paper will stimulate discussion on the connection between the BC-STV and gender by exploring two main questions. First, would the BC-STV have had a positive effect on the gender balance in BC's legislature? Second, how did "gendered actors" influence the citizen assembly's treatment of women's representation as a democratic value?

The impact analysis of gender conducted in this paper is based upon Karen Beckwith's (2005) definition of "gender as process" (p. 132). According to Beckwith, gender as process operates in two main ways. First, it is "manifested as the differential effects of apparently gender-neutral structures and policies upon women and men" (p.132). In other words, societal institutions are often "gendered" in the sense that they provide different privileges and opportunities to men and women, for example by limiting women's access to traditionally "male" professions. Part A of this paper will illustrate this aspect of "gender as process" by assessing the electoral system in BC as a gendered institution. I will argue that female candidates in British Columbia would fare much better under BC-STV than they currently do under BC's single-member plurality (SMP) system.

For Beckwith (2005), gender also operates as process in a second way. Various "gendered actors," whose identity is defined in part by the gender roles commonly ascribed to their members, seek to "regender state power, policymaking, and state legal constructions and their interpretations" (p. 133). Part B of this paper will illustrate this second aspect of "gender as process" by highlighting the contrasting levels of influence enjoyed by female BCCA members, organized feminist groups, and male staff members over the BCCA's work. Male staff members enjoyed much greater influence over the BCCA's work than either individual female members or organized feminist groups. As a result, a concern for women's representation was essentially "written out" of the assembly's agenda.

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[1] The assembly, consisting of 161 randomly selected citizens from across the province, met over the course of a year to learn about different electoral systems, identify the values that a new system should reflect, and propose what it deemed to be the best system for BC in a final report. In order to make an informed decision, assembly members attended 50 public hearings, considered 1,603 written statements from the public, and deliberated extensively about democratic reform in small group meetings (British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform [BCCA], 2004, p. 1; Seidle, 2007, pp. 308-309).

[2] Voter support for this new system failed to pass the 60% super-majority threshold set by the government for its adoption, both in the first referendum of 2004 and in a second referendum held in May 2009 (Hall, 2009; Lang, 2007, p. 36; Seidle, 2007, pp. 308-312).

PART A: The Electoral System as a Gendered Institution

In this section, I will examine the electoral system as a key example of Beckwith's (2005) first definition of gender as process, by which "apparently gender-neutral structures and policies" (p.132) have a differential impact upon men and women. That electoral rules frequently discriminate against female candidates is a reality well-documented in scholarly research (Newman & White, 2006, pp. 123-125; Rule & Zimmerman, 1994). In fact, one key study of 23 democracies has found that, among a wide variety of factors including socio-economic aspects, district magnitude, and religion, the electoral system is the best predictor of female representation in legislatures around the world (Kaminsky & White, 2007, p. 186). Yet what precise implications would a new electoral system have for female candidates in BC?

To answer this question, I will begin with a brief description of BC's current single-member plurality system and its effects on women's representation. Next, I describe the BC-STV and highlight several theoretical arguments which should lead us to conclude that female electoral candidates enjoy greater success under this particular system. As I will note, however, some empirical evidence seems to contradict these theoretical arguments. Therefore, in order to more fully assess the potential impacts of the STV on women's representation in BC, I will conclude with an assessment of BC's situation in the light of three mediating variables that commonly influence electoral outcomes: political culture, district magnitudes, and the internal culture of political parties.

Differences between the single-member plurality and single-transferable voting systems

British Columbia currently uses a single-member plurality (SMP) electoral system, one that has been frequently critiqued for its negative impact on women's representation. The main reason for this negative impact is that under SMP, each party only nominates one candidate, who must then win a plurality of votes in order to be elected. As a result, the practice of ticket balancing (nominating females or members of minority groups) is a risky move for parties to undertake. Electoral committee members feel pressured to choose a representative who will appeal to the majority of voters, and this candidate typically happens to be a professional white male (Young, 1994, pp. 10-11). Furthermore, third parties (including women's parties and leftist parties that are more sympathetic to female candidates) are generally disadvantaged under SMP, a system designed to generate majority governments (British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform [BCCA] p. 3; Newman & White, 2006, pp. 123-124; Young, 1994, pp. 6-9).

The SMP system is clearly no boon to female representation in politics. Not surprisingly, SMP countries across the world[3] elect fewer female representatives than those using proportional representation (Kaminsky & White, 2007, p. 186). Canada, for example, ranked 44th in the world in 2006 regarding the percentage of females in its legislature (20.8%), whereas PR-countries such as Sweden, Norway, and Finland made the top of the list, with women making up 37% to 45% of their legislatures (Tremblay, 2008, 56).

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[3] In Canada, the disadvantage for women under SMP is especially pronounced in rural constituencies (Bashevkin, 2009, p. 12).

In 2004, the BC Citizens' Assembly proposed that British Columbia should do away with the SMP system and introduce a form of proportional representation[4] known as the single-transferable vote (STV). Under STV, voters rank multiple candidates from various parties in their constituency, placing a number beside each candidate in the order of their preference. All candidates who gain a sufficient number of votes to meet a pre-set threshold are automatically elected. Should a preferred candidate's share of the vote exceed this threshold, all excess votes will be transferred to other candidates who were also ranked favorably by voters. A fairly complex process of transferring votes continues until all vacant legislative seats are filled (BCCA, 2004, pp. 4-5).

Although this process has been disparaged by critics as one that is simply too complex and confusing for voters, it does hold significant advantages for females seeking seats in the legislature. Three of the most relevant theoretical advantages the STV will be discussed here: the use of multi-member districts, increased opportunities for affirmative action, and the increased potential for a positive "contagion effect."

Theoretical arguments for the STV's ability to produce gender parity in the legislative assembly

The first theoretical advantage of the STV system rests upon its use of multi-member districts (MMDs). Multi-member districts allow political parties to run a greater number and, therefore, also a greater diversity of candidates, expanding their nomination choices beyond that of the prototypical white male (BCCA, 2004, p. 6; Young, 1994, p. 18). Furthermore, because voters choose more than one candidate per district, the threshold for representation is usually quite low, so that female candidates stand a better chance of being elected (Kaminsky & White, 2007, p. 187). Data from state legislatures in the U.S. strongly confirms the MMD advantage. According to Rule (1994), women occupied only 12.4% in states that used single-member districts but held an average 21.8% of legislative seats in states that used MMDs. Moreover, those states that switched from multi-member to single-member districts saw women's representation in their legislatures fall by 20% over an eleven-year period, even while the country's national average rose by 68% (p. 691). If multi-member districts were introduced in BC, we should therefore expect a noticeable improvement in women's representation.

A second theoretical advantage of STV is that it creates increased opportunities for parties to enforce affirmative action practices. Young (1994) has argued that in proportional representation systems employing party lists, political parties can easily practice affirmative action, either by setting quotas for the number of female candidates in their party list or by alternating male and female candidate names on the list. Because party lists are fully open to public scrutiny, it is strategically dangerous for parties to nominate few female candidates, as this practice may quickly inspire public criticism (pp. 18-19).

Single-transferable voting does not rely on such party lists. Nevertheless, it resembles traditional list-based systems in two respects: parties under this system still have to propose several candidates in

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[4] Under a proportional representation system, the proportion of seats a party holds roughly reflects the proportion of the popular vote it received. The single-transferable vote and list-based systems are the two main types of proportional representation (Young, 1994, pp. 14-17). As a group, proportional representation systems tend to produce more coalition governments and bring more third parties (including women's parties) into the legislature (Newman & White, 2006, pp. 124-125; Young, pp. 15-17).

each riding, and the public is equally free to scrutinize each party's choice of nominees as shown on the ballot (BCCA, 2004, p. 4). Under such circumstances, no political party would want to cause public outrage by excluding female candidates from its ballot lists. We can therefore predict that the BC-STV would give parties a similar opportunity to impose gender quotas and similar incentives for gender parity on ballot lists.

The so-called "contagion theory" provides a third theoretical reason for the STV advantage. It proposes that, in a multi-party system, the choices of one party can easily trigger changes to the policy stances of another. For example, when a third party (often a leftist party) actively promotes female representation, the dominant party will follow suit, primarily because it fears a potential loss of voter support. Contagion theory predicts that this effect will be stronger under proportional representation (PR) systems than under SMP[5], for a very simple reason: third parties under PR can more easily gain seats in the legislature and thus pose a greater threat to the dominant party, which will henceforth adapt its policy stances to suit public sensibilities (Kaminsky & White, 2007, p. 189). Like list-based PR systems, STV is known to create a momentous advantage for third parties (BCCA, 2004, p. 7). Thus, we can predict that the contagion effect under STV will be very pronounced, putting pressure on major parties to practice affirmative action.

From a purely theoretical perspective then, we should expect women in BC to fare extremely well under an STV system. The combined effects of multi-member districts, increased opportunities for affirmative action, and the contagion effect would presumably bring more women into the legislature. Unfortunately, not all empirical findings support the claim that STV helps more women get elected[6]. On the one hand, Australia, which elects its senators through an STV system, has a remarkably high number of female senators (Mackerras & Maley, 1998, pp. 238-247). Yet on the other hand, in Malta and Ireland, women's representation under the STV is remarkably low. Since 2000, women have comprised only about 13.2% of the Irish national legislature and a mere 9.3% of Malta's House of Representatives[7] (Pilon, 2007, p. 130). These findings leave us with an obvious problem: if some empirical findings contradict the theoretical advantages of STV, how can we possibly predict whether the STV would have a positive or negative effect on female representation in British Columbia? In order to assess the precise impact of STV on the province, we will need to consider three key variables that typically mediate between a particular electoral system and representational outcomes: culture, district magnitude, and party support.

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[5] A study by Matland and Studlar (1996) offers support for this view. The researchers found a micro-contagion effect under Norway's PR system but not under Canada's SMP system.

[6] Adding further support to the studies already discussed above, one researcher has found that when it comes to providing better opportunities for female candidates, list-based PR systems place first among electoral systems and STV systems place second (Young, 1994, p. 27). Similarly, in a statistical analysis based on data from the Australian senate and House of Commons, Kaminsky and White predicted that if the senate replaced its current STV system with SMD, it would experience an average 76% decline in the number of female representatives (p. 193).

[7] Examples like these have been commonly cited as empirical evidence that STV is, in fact, bad for women's representation, both in scholarly research and in British Columbia's anti-STV campaign "Know STV" (Hirczy, 1995, pp. 711-712; No STV, 2009).

Mediating variables between the electoral system and its effects upon female representation

Culture constitutes the first mediating variable between an electoral system and electoral outcomes. A consideration of culture, in fact, will help us disentangle the puzzling discrepancy in women's representation that we find between Malta, Ireland, and Australia. As Hirczy (1995) explains, an STV system by itself neither hurts nor helps women. Rather, it simply "maximizes the input of the average citizens" (p.712), so that STV countries with conservative cultures elect few women and those with liberal cultures elect a generous number of women (p.712). This trend is precisely what we find at work in the three countries mentioned above. Ireland and Malta share a very conservative culture based in Catholicism which offers little support for female leaders. Australia, by contrast, has a much more liberal culture with a vocal feminist movement (Mackerras & Maley, 1998, pp. 231-232, 237, 246; Hirczy, 712).

With respect to such cultural considerations, what can we conclude about BC? We have good reason to believe that BC, like Australia, enjoys a relatively "woman-friendly" culture. In Canada, 61% of women work for pay, compared to 53% in Ireland and 34% in Malta. In the 2007 Gender Development Index, Canada ranked fourth while Ireland placed 15th and Malta placed 33rd (Seager, 2009, 116-121)[8]. Further indicative of BC's "woman-friendly" culture is the fact that both the proponents and the opponents of the BC-STV felt the need to address the issue of women's representation in their campaign messages (Power up Your Vote [PUYV], 2009; No STV, 2009). They probably would not have done this if women's representation were not a valued concern among the public. In the midst of a highly supportive political culture, therefore, the BC-STV would most likely help rather than hurt female candidates.

A second mediating variable that influences electoral outcomes is district magnitude. As stated earlier, multi-member districts tend to improve women's representation, but the extent of this positive effect grows with the number of members nominated in a given district (Tremblay, 2009, pp. 53-54)[9]. The reason for this trend is not hard to discern. The larger the number of candidates each party proposes, the more obvious it becomes when a party fails to nominate a proportionally appropriate number of female candidates. In order to evade public criticism, parties will feel motivated to maintain a gender balance on the voting ballot (Young, 1994, p. 28).

Empirical research confirms the importance of district magnitude. As one study of twenty-two countries has demonstrated, there is a linear relationship between district magnitude and the percentage of women elected to parliaments (Matland & Studler, 1996, pp. 477-478). Moreover, a larger district magnitude has been associated with higher turnover in parliaments (Matland & Studlar, 1996, pp. 477-478), a condition that tends to benefit female candidates (Kaminsky & White, 2007, p. 188).

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[8] Both sides hired public polling companies in order to assess which types of campaign messages would resonate best with the public (MacLeod, 2009a, 2009b).

[9] Theoretically, as the number of seats to be filled rises, so too does the opportunity for women to get elected (Tremblay, 2009, pp. 53-54).

Would the STV in British Columbia operate under district magnitudes of sufficient sizes to benefit female candidates? According to the 2008 Electoral Boundaries Commission, district magnitudes under the BC-STV would vary between two and seven members, depending on the district (Electoral Reform Referendum Information Office, 2009). Young (1994) estimates that for a multi-party system in which three main parties compete with one another (as is the case in BC), the ideal minimum district magnitude is six members (Young, 1994, p. 37). Therefore, under the BC-STV, the district magnitude may be too low in some districts to produce a strong positive effect. Still, we could expect a positive effect for women's representation in those BC districts that elect six to seven members. Female candidates in the larger centres would enjoy a great advantage under the STV.

A third mediating variable that strongly influences electoral outcomes is the willingness of political parties to run female candidates in competitive ridings. The central importance of party support for women's electoral success has been widely articulated by scholars, who have pointed to the pivotal role of party leaders (Newman & White, 2006, p. 126) and "male gatekeepers" (Hawkesworth, 2005, p. 150) in controlling the nomination of female candidates[10]. How high would party support for women be in British Columbia? If developments in the Province at all resemble those at the federal level, then we have reason to be optimistic. As Newman and White observe, Canadian parties are now increasingly willing to run female candidates, and the "sacrificial lamb" phenomenon (parties running female candidates in ridings where the party is likely to lose) is on the decline in Canada (pp. 117-121).

British Columbia's three major parties are probably no exception to this trend. For example, the BC Greens have openly supported the BC-STV on the grounds that it would improve the representation of women (Green Party of BC, 2009). The NDP has recently imposed quotas on the number of female candidates in its own party (Vancouver Sun, 2009), and although the BC Liberals officially oppose what they call "anti-democratic, affirmative action policies" (BC Liberals, 2009), they have at least made a normative commitment to creating a more attractive environment for female politicians. In fact, the BC Liberals ran more female candidates in the 2005 election than the NDP (BC Liberals). We have strong reason to believe that political parties in BC would take advantage of the increased opportunities for affirmative action afforded by a single-transferable voting system.

In light of the theoretical arguments and mediating variables discussed above, we can now reach a final verdict: a shift to the BC-STV system would trigger a substantial rise in the number of women elected to the BC legislature. The single-transferable vote would bring with it all the benefits of multi-member districts, greater affirmative action opportunities, and the potential for a strong contagion effect. That BC would elect a very low number of female representatives under STV, as Malta and Ireland do, is highly unlikely. The Province's wider political culture and the internal culture of its parties both appear supportive of increased female representation in the legislature. Moreover, under the BC-STV, at least some of BC's constituencies would feature district magnitudes of six to seven members, a favorable circumstance for female candidates.

The BC Citizens' Assembly evidently has proposed a system that would improve women's representation. Yet was gender equality a key concern for the assembly when it proposed this evidently beneficial system? As the next section will reveal, this was probably not the case. In fact, women's

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[10] Tremblay has noted that the degree of support for women among political parties can play a larger role in determining female success in politics than the electoral system itself (p. 63).

representation never made it onto the assembly's official agenda, a circumstance that may be traced back to a gender-based power imbalance between the various "gendered actors" seeking to influence the BCCA.

Part B: Re-gendering the Electoral System: How Gendered Actors Influenced the BCCA

We are now left to explore the second aspect of Beckwith's (2005) definition of "gender as process," which she describes as the activity of political actors who "instate practices and rules that recast the nature of the political" (p.133) and who seek to "regender state power, policymaking, and state legal constructions and their interpretations" (p. 133). In this section, I will discuss three gendered actors[11] who attempted to influence the final decision of the BC Citizens' Assembly: female members of the BCCA, feminist groups advocating for women's representation, and male BCCA leadership staff. As the discussion will show, socially constructed gender dynamics, embedded in our patriarchal culture, served either to help or to hinder each actor in its ability to influence the BCCA.

Female BCCA members as gendered actors

The first group we may analyze as a "gendered actor" is the female members of the BCCA. The government of BC made a decided effort to create gender balance in the BCCA, insisting that one male and one female member be selected from each constituency (Seidle, 2007, p. 308). Gender balance in the assembly, however, did not immediately translate into successful advocacy for women's interests. For example, the assembly was asked to debate the types of interests that should be used as criteria for selecting a new electoral system. Several rural citizens spoke up for rural representation, and several women spoke up for women's political representation (Lang, 2008, pp. 98-100). Yet while the assembly soon came to a consensus that proper rural representation constituted a legitimate criterion for evaluating an electoral system, it failed to reach the same kind of consensus on women's representation and consequently excluded this concern from its list of formal evaluation criteria (pp. 95-99). Why was female representation side-lined as a critical issue? Can feminist theory shed light on this development?

The assembly's failure to accept women's representation as a legitimate political claim can only be fully understood in the context of our patriarchal culture and its influences on the BCCA's group interactions. Patriarchy, according to Johnson (2005), is a system of male privilege that operates at all levels, from the institutional level to the organizational level and even to the level of individual interactions (p. 18). Johnson points out that our patriarchal culture not only contains male privilege but also maintains it by discouraging any critical discussion of the subject. Thus, both men and women under patriarchy are typically unwilling to articulate the fact that male privilege exists, and even less willing to openly challenge it (pp.22-26). In Johnson's words, "patriarchy encourages men to accept male privilege...if only through silence. And it encourages women to accept and adapt that oppressed position even to the extent of undermining movements to bring about change" (p. 15).

Precisely these tendencies became apparent early on in the BCCA meetings. As Lang (2008) recalls from one small group discussion on the issue of women's representation:

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[11] A group may be analyzed as "gendered" either by virtue of the male or female identities ascribed to its members, or by virtue of the masculinized or feminized strategies employed by this group in an effort to achieve its goals. In this section, the term "gendered actor" will restrict itself to the first definition for the sake of brevity.

One woman in the group tentatively said she thought it was a good idea. The idea was supported by a couple of men. Other men spoke against singling women out, saying they thought things had progressed very far and would continue to progress. At the prompting of the facilitator for some women to start speaking, the other women started to weigh in, arguing against "being singled out." [...] It seemed that several women on the Assembly felt that they were not suffering because there were few women in the legislature and [that] women didn't need active help to enter the legislature. (p.98)

Even a woman who identified herself as a strong, educated feminist explained in a later interview that she found it very difficult to raise the "taboo subject" of women's representation among her group members. As the assembly's deliberation phase progressed, no one dared to take on the task of advocating for women's representation in the way others had spoken up for rural interests (p. 100). Patriarchal culture thus operated at the micro-level of group interactions, preventing women's representation from becoming a central topic of discussion.

Feminist groups as gendered actors

Feminist groups[12] comprise a second group of "gendered actors" whose endeavors to influence the BCCA were constrained by pre-existing gender dynamics. One such group was Equal Voice, whose chair appeared before the citizens' assembly to argue that "any change in the voting system should encourage the election of more women" (Speirs & Anderson, 2005). To the consternation of this group, the BCCA did not react with much enthusiasm to their proposal (2005). The West Coast Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF) had a similar experience. Its written submission to the BCCA urged the assembly to propose a modified form of the mixed-member proportional system, which West Coast LEAF deemed to be an optimal system for electing more women. Whether this system would indeed have been better for women than the STV is a complex question that will not be addressed here for the sake of brevity. What we must remark, however, is that the assembly evidently chose not to follow West Coast LEAF's recommendation. In fact, it initially overlooked the organization's submission altogether (Lang, 2008, p. 99). Can feminist theory help us explain this evident lack of responsiveness to women's organized interests?

One possible explanation[13] for the general lack of responsiveness is that feminist groups have generally enjoyed a low level of legitimacy under the (male dominated) neo-liberal state in Canada. Alexandra Dobrowolsky (2009) has documented the close connection between the rise of the neo-liberal state and the weakening of the women's movement in Canada. At the federal level, the Canadian neo-liberal state has not only cut funding to various feminist groups, including LEAF (Dobrowolsky, 2009, p.

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[12] It must be noted here that feminist groups did not agree on what type of electoral system would best benefit women's representation. Some feminists, in fact, failed to see the advantages of STV and openly spoke out against it. For example, some organized women's groups in Canada opposed the STV system because it includes few electoral districts with a high district magnitude (Pilon, 2007, 122). National activist Doris Anderson dismissed the system as "plain dumb," citing the classic "Malta and Ireland" argument discussed earlier in this paper (Globe and Mail, 2005). A point of agreement, however, seems to have been that women's representation is a crucial criterion that must be considered in any discussion of electoral reform.

[13] Another possible reason not discussed here is that Canadian politics has traditionally been strongly defined by a focus on regional identity. Other social identities such race, age, and gender consequently tend to be side-lined as less legitimate grounds for political demands (Lang, 2007, 58). Furthermore, BC's (male dominated) governing party had created an official mandate for the citizens' assembly that made no mention of women's representation (BCCA, 2004, p. 14). As a result, members did not feel it was their responsibility to consider the issue at length (Speirs & Anderson, 2005).

15) but has also shifted dominant political discourses away from a focus on equality (which is central to the feminist movement) towards a focus on discourses of social cohesion and inclusion. As Alison Brewer, executive director of West Coast LEAF, confirms, "there are few feminist groups still in existence in BC and Canada, fewer still that aren't focused almost entirely on direct service provision to women... [This results from the] idea of individual responsibility and the need to establish the innocent victim before public resources will be assigned to that group" (A. Brewer, personal communication, November 18, 2009).   In the midst of this neo-liberal political culture, BCCA members likely viewed feminist groups as illegitimate "special interests" that should not unduly influence the process of deliberation.

BCCA leadership staff as gendered actors

A third "gendered actor" that played an active role in the deliberation process was the BCCA leadership staff, whom we may consider "gendered" simply in the sense that staff members holding the most powerful leadership positions of the BCCA were all male[14]. Jack Blaney from Simon Fraser University acted as chair, while Dr. Ken Carty and Dr. Campbell Sharman from the University of British Columbia designed and taught the curriculum for the assembly's learning phase on electoral systems (Lang, 2007, p. 39; BCCA, 2004, p. 15). This male-dominated authority structure set the BCCA's formal agenda and thus had a substantial effect on how the BCCA deliberation process proceeded, as I will illustrate with two key examples.

First, staff consolidated the assembly's neglect of women's interests in favor of geographically-based interests. When the issue of Northern representation was brought to the table, BCCA staff readily organized a guest speaker for a presentation on BC's demographics and planned an early-morning meeting specifically designed for members from rural constituencies. These concerted efforts helped ensure that Northern interests remained on the BCCA's agenda (Lang, 2008, p. 98). In stark contrast, staff members were reluctant to support women's representation, making no efforts to encourage special meetings on the issue and bringing in a speaker on the subject only after considerable hesitation. The speaker, Lisa Young, interestingly argued that increases in the number of female legislators depended primarily upon the priorities of political parties, not upon the electoral system. As a result, many BCCA members came to conclude that a discussion of women's representation as a key criterion for electoral reform simply did not lie within the assembly's mandate (pp. 100-102).

Secondly, the leadership staff prevented the assembly from adopting a focus on "social and cultural representation," an umbrella term that encompassed women's representation. For example, during the assembly's deliberation phase, members worked in small groups to identify the top three values that should later inform the assembly's decision on electoral systems. Fair election results, local representation, and greater voter choice emerged as the top three values in this process (Lang, 2008, p. 99; BCCA, 2004, p. 2). However, social and cultural representation also emerged as a key concern among many small groups, who expressed interest in exploring this value further. The BCCA staff, however, insisted that the deliberation process move along and discouraged further discussion of the topic (Lang, pp. 101-102). We cannot, of course, infer from this that male staff *intentionally* tried to subvert women's interests, but it does appear that staff members were generally insensitive to the importance of the issue.

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[14] It is also worth noting that it was a male, Gordon Gibson, who was hired by the BC government to draw up the basic structure and outline the responsibilities of the citizens' assembly (Seidle, 2007, pp. 308-309; BCCA, 2004, p. 15).

Undoubtedly, the male-dominated leadership structure of the BCCA played a pivotal role in shaping the direction of the assembly's decision-making process, effectively side-lining the achievement of gender parity in favor of other interests[15]. The failure of female assembly members and feminist groups to bring women's representation onto the BCCA agenda can thus be attributed to three factors: the norms of patriarchal culture that influenced the assembly's micro-level interactions; the lack of legitimacy enjoyed by feminist groups under the neo-liberal state; and, most importantly, the over-arching influence of male authority figures in the process of deliberation. In essence, the masculine "gendered actor" in this case enjoyed greater power to influence the BCCA than either of the two feminine gendered actors. We can conclude, therefore, that the ability of various political actors to "re-gender" the electoral system heavily depends upon their particular masculine or feminine identities.

Conclusion

It has become evident through this paper that if we wish to fully understand the implications of electoral reform for British Columbia, feminist theory provides us with an absolutely indispensable angle of analysis. As we consider the potential effects of the BC-STV and the work of the citizens' assembly that proposed it, we ought to pay attention to the ways that gender presently operates as "process" in electoral politics. First, "gender as process" is evident in the differential effects of STV and SMP systems on women's representation; second, it is evident in the differential impacts that masculine and feminine actors have upon the deliberations around electoral reform itself.

As a gendered institution, the current SMP electoral system poses immense barriers to the election of women. Had BC instigated the proposed BC-STV system, it would likely have reaped the benefits of multi-member districts, affirmative action opportunities, and the contagion effect on women's representation. Many of the province's constituencies would have employed large district magnitudes, which tend to help female candidates. Moreover, BC's relatively woman-friendly culture and supportive political parties would have ensured that women benefited rather than suffered under STV.

That the BCCA chose STV out of a concern for women's representation, however, is unlikely[16]. A focus on women's representation never made it into the BCCA's official list of criteria for judging electoral systems, due in part to the power imbalance that existed between feminine and masculine actors seeking to influence the BCCA. Female assembly members found that their comments were unwelcome in a patriarchal culture that was both blind to male privilege and resistant to change. Feminist groups were not taken seriously, as is typical under the male-dominated neoliberal state. Male staff of the BCCA, in contrast, occupied positions of authority that allowed them to exert greater influence on the citizens' assembly than either of the two "feminine" actors.

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[15] Interestingly, the staff of the Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform later took a very different approach to women's representation, actively encouraging the establishment of a working group on the issue. Lang attributes this development to the persistence of certain advocates and the fact that little real opposition to the idea existed among the Ontario assembly members (A. Lang, personal communication, November 9, 2009).

[16] The great irony of this analysis, of course, lies in the fact that although the BC citizens' assembly side-lined the issue of women's representation, it still proposed an electoral system that would substantially improve women's representation. Why this is was the case and whether other electoral systems such as MMP might have been even better options for women's representation in BC are two interesting questions for further research.

This paper has demonstrated that feminist theory is an extremely useful tool for the study of electoral reform movements. Should the issue of electoral reform once again surface in BC or other Canadian provinces in the future, then an assessment of "gender as process" must be more closely incorporated into scholarly debates. Bringing feminist theory into the discussion will not only deepen political discourses around reform but may also prevent future decision-makers from side-lining women's representation as a "non-issue" that must give way to other, more established bases of political representation.

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