

**Political Education Campaigns on Electoral Reform:  
Evaluating the Ontario Experience**

*Major Research Paper*

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## **Abstract**

In the age of fragmented audience, fast-paced lives and six-second sound bites, mounting an effective public education campaign can prove exceptionally difficult, particularly when complex subject matter is involved. Prior to Ontario's 2007 referendum on choosing an electoral system, Elections Ontario embarked on such a campaign to teach the populace of the choice it faced, but a number of factors stood in the way.

Using a qualitative approach of document analysis, this research paper compares the political education drive of Elections Ontario to the public information campaign model established by Weiss and Tschirhart, with supporting research from such scholars as Coffman, Gastil and Hyman and Sheatsley. The campaign successes and failures are analyzed, as is the reasoning behind why the effort is widely considered to have fallen short. Finally, this paper considers the challenge of educating a disinterested or distracted public on intricate issues such as electoral reform.

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## Introduction

In order to make a referendum a meaningful democratic exercise, consideration must be given to political education via a public information campaign, especially on a matter of such constitutional significance as electoral reform (Hazell & Chalmers, 2010). In recent years, with voter turnout falling and apathy rising, along with public trust in politicians wallowing near all-time lows (see for example Campbell, 2009), a public institution charged with increasing awareness of complex issues faces a unique set of challenges that must be considered when planning for an effective public information campaign. Simply telling people to vote is insufficient; voters must understand the choice they face and the implications of each option before them. Unlike a sales team for sports cars, for example, a public institution cannot ignore any voting-age demographic in its awareness campaign. All adult citizens must be included within the scope of campaign planning and communication must be crafted to be able to reach and be understood by a wide array of voter constituencies. If voters are invited to the polls only to vote “blindly,” on an issue about which they know little, can the exercise truly be considered democratic? Does democratic governance not carry with it a requirement to instil a certain level of civic knowledge among the population?

In Ontario in October 2007, voters were given a choice of whether to keep the United Kingdom-born Single Member Plurality (SMP) electoral system (also known as “first past the post”) or replace it with a German-inspired alternative known as Mixed Member Proportional (MMP).<sup>1</sup> SMP routinely results in the election of powerful majority<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> To view a more detailed explanation of Ontario’s proposed adaptation of MMP, please visit <http://www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca/assets/Description%20of%20the%20Ontario%20Citizens%27%20Assembly%27s%20MMP%20System.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> A “majority” government is one that holds 50%+1 of the seats in the legislature, and thus is able to pass its legislation without the necessity of seeking the support of one or more opposition parties.

governments backed by only a minority of the vote, leading to suggestions that these “majority” governments lack a sufficient democratic mandate to justify their actions (Leduc, Bastedo and Baquero, 2008).<sup>3</sup> Other arguments against the SMP system include “wasted votes” – with only votes for the constituency winner actually counting toward the makeup of the legislature – as well as the tendency of the system to not elect women or visible minorities (Ibid: 29). Critics point to such bizarre SMP outcomes as the 1987 New Brunswick election, where sixty percent of the provincial vote won the Liberals every single constituency, or the 1998 Québec election, where the Parti Québécois won a majority government while actually taking *fewer* votes than the opposition Liberals.<sup>4</sup>

The MMP system presents citizens with two votes: one for their local representative and one for their party of choice.<sup>5</sup> The reform proposal involved reducing the number of constituencies and supplementing the legislature with a number of “at large” representatives elected from pre-established party lists. If a party’s share of seats in the legislature as won through the constituency elections did not match its proportion of the party vote, the lists would be used to “top up” the party’s representation. The idea is that if a party gets 30% of the party vote, they should have as close as possible to 30% of the seats. Supporters argued that constituency representation would be maintained, but with a more representative legislative body.

While it was a Royal Commission that recommended such a switch in New Zealand in the late 1980s, in Ontario the vote was the culmination of work by a Citizens’ Assembly

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<sup>3</sup> In the Ontario case, the last time that a majority government was elected with a majority of votes was in 1937 (Hoff, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> For detailed election results, visit <http://www.quebecpolitique.com/elections-et-referendums/elections-generales/election-generale-de-1998/>.

<sup>5</sup> The SMP system, in contrast, entails just one vote – the party and the candidate votes are combined. The candidate within the constituency that wins a plurality of votes earns the right to represent the constituency in the legislature. The representativeness of the legislative body vis-à-vis province- or nation-wide vote percentages simply falls as it may.

for Electoral Reform (CAER) commissioned by the Liberal government to fulfill its campaign promise to examine electoral reform. This exercise in “deliberative democracy” was referred to by Leduc et al. (2008: 6) as “a revolutionary experiment in citizen democratic engagement” and one of the “first of its kind in the world.” Following part-time education and deliberation sessions between September 2006 and April 2007, the CAER recommended MMP to the people of Ontario. The CAER felt that MMP would increase democratic power, help smaller parties and encourage politicians to cooperate, while critics complained that the plan was a recipe for less stable government, more powerful party heads and excessively complex voting procedures. (Ibid) In fact, in Germany, where MMP has been used since 1953 (Karp, 2006), voter confusion over the system persists (Roberts, 2002).

Prior to the referendum vote on October 10, 2007,<sup>6</sup> a “political education” campaign was launched in order to teach the populace of the choice it faced. The New Zealand public information campaign that happened on the same issue 15 years prior was labelled a “great success” by Hazell and Chalmers (2010), with an independent body set up to organize the program, detailed literature delivered to all households, and seminars and television programs sponsored to increase citizen awareness. These scholars argue however that, in 2007, Elections Ontario<sup>7</sup> interpreted its mandate very narrowly, simply telling the public that a referendum was happening and instructing them to vote, rather than providing sufficient explanatory materials. Voters were poorly informed, with the primary source of details about the choices being the mass media (Ibid), from which most Ontarians get their political

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<sup>6</sup> The result of the vote was 37% in favour of MMP and 63% in favour of SMP. For detailed results, please visit <http://www.elections.on.ca/NR/rdonlyres/61A53BBE-4F27-41F7-AF0E-5D3D6F8D153D/0/ReferendumStatisticalResults.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Elections Ontario is a non-partisan Agency of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario, charged with organizing and conducting general elections and by-elections and overseeing political expenditures (Elections Ontario, 2007).

information (Pilon, 2007b). Further, while media coverage around New Zealand's public discussion of MMP was "extensive and largely favourable" (Leduc et al., 2008: 4), then-University of Victoria assistant professor of political science Dennis Pilon's (2009) content analysis of media coverage leading up to the Ontario referendum found that that media reports were scarce, and largely opposed to MMP. Jonathan Rose posits that New Zealand's campaign excelled through the use of "the language of advertising and the modes and ways of communicating," while Elections Ontario was too "paranoid about tainting their neutral brand," and so the information available to voters was insufficient (personal communication, March 15, 2013).

Hazell and Chalmers (2010) argue that, in a referendum, low levels of public knowledge work in favour of the status quo rather than reform. Citizens certainly have the right to reject a referendum choice. However, in order that each option before them is well understood, a comprehensive public information campaign must be conducted to ensure that informed ballots are cast on voting day.

Through the illustration of a case study analysis, looking at an array of relevant documents and an interview with a subject matter expert, the performance of Elections Ontario's political education campaign will be measured against the defined theoretical model outlined below, thus allowing for conclusions to be drawn as to its effectiveness. This research will critically evaluate how the Elections Ontario effort leading up to the 2007 referendum demonstrated successes or failures, and why.

## **Methodology**

While some observers have concluded that Elections Ontario's public information campaign was lacking, this research is intended to determine whether this assessment is accurate and illustrate why this was or was not the case. The research question of this paper is as follows:

**RQ) Considering the characteristics of an effective political education campaign, how did the Elections Ontario effort leading up to the 2007 electoral reform referendum demonstrate successes or failures, and why?**

### **Case study approach**

The present research was completed using the qualitative research method. The purpose was not to gather a representative sample through random selection of sampling elements, but rather to learn and draw conclusions from a wide variety of elements. A nonprobability sample, using a case study, was most appropriate for this research.

Researchers use the case study methodology for many purposes, including “to explore or to describe an object or phenomenon.” Explanations for events are tested (Yin, 1981) and the use of a variety of data ensures that the matter “is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood” (Baxter & Jack, 2008: 544). Soy (2006) allows that critics believe that the case study method “can offer no grounds for establishing reliability or generality of findings” and may be “useful only as an exploratory tool.”

The purpose of the present research is not to challenge or create current theoretical approaches on how to most effectively conduct a public information campaign; rather, the aim is to explore current theoretical models, select an appropriate framework, and compare

the case study against this model. While the limitations of the present research prevent a comprehensive study allowing for generalizations, the purpose will be exploratory and hopefully of use in understanding citizen education needs with regard to political referendums. The research scope means that the conclusions drawn will be positioned as advisory rather than scientific.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Using document analysis and an interview with a subject matter expert, the case study will be measured qualitatively against the paradigm established through the theoretical framework to follow. Document analysis is an investigative method that focuses on material and documents that already exist from the time period under analysis, to the exclusion of additional elements, created at a later date, such as interviews with subject matter experts. (Heffernan, n.d.) The existence of a wide array of such material made a document analysis the sensible approach for the present research, and these empirical data were used as sampling elements to form part of a larger case study analysis, using inductive reasoning, to evaluate the Elections Ontario political education campaign on the 2007 electoral reform referendum.

The present research was formulated on a macroscopic conceptual level. Sampling elements were considered in terms of their effectiveness on the political education of the population as a whole, rather than on individual citizens. Research has already been carried out on the awareness of individuals prior to, during and following the referendum campaign under analysis, and these data developed at the microscopic level were useful to this macroscopic level research project.

Elements were selected based on the researcher's perception of their ability to lend aid to the understanding of the conduct and evaluation of the public information campaign leading up to the 2007 Ontario referendum. Primary sources used for this research included reports from Elections Ontario (and other bodies that had conducted referendums of a similar nature), academic writings from the Ontario referendum campaign period, and a number of news media articles from the time that not only outline the awareness activities of Elections Ontario, but provide subject matter expert commentary on its performance. Due to the exemption of Elections Ontario from provincial Freedom of Information legislation, this research utilized publicly available documents. Communications strategies, planning documents and internal correspondence about the public information campaign were not provided by Elections Ontario.

Secondary sources utilized for this research included more recent information provided by Elections Ontario in response to e-mailed questions and media analyses and other research completed in the years following the referendum vote. Consulted documents were, for the most part, scholarly journal articles as well as certain news media articles, especially when subject matter expert observations were included.

To further expand the secondary information available for this case study analysis, interviews were sought with subject matter experts in the academic realm and at Elections Ontario. While Elections Ontario declined the interview request, opting instead to provide written information, an interview was completed with Dr. Jonathan Rose, arguably the leading academic subject matter expert on the case study. While numerous academics as well as journalists have written about the outcome of the public information campaign in question, whether from a supportive or critical perspective, Dr. Rose had the distinction of being the

academic director of the CAER and someone who was highly engaged with the process throughout the period under study. He is extremely familiar with the content in the case study and had been previously approached by others – journalists in particular – seeking expert opinion on the political education effort of Elections Ontario. It was for these reasons that Dr. Rose was approached for an interview. His comments are accompanied in the research by the writings of other experts such as Dr. Lawrence Leduc of the University of Toronto, Dr. Fred Cutler of the University of British Columbia, Dr. Patrick Fournier of the Université de Montréal, and Dr. Dennis Pilon of York University,<sup>8</sup> among others.

The researcher felt that a structured interview with Dr. Rose would be too restrictive, as the opportunity to probe for more detail or additional sampling elements would be narrower. A line of questioning was completed in advance both at the request of the interviewee and as a requirement of the ethics application process; as such, an open-ended interview with no script was not an appropriate approach. Therefore, the interview was semi-structured in that the key questions were prepared in advance but the option to ask probing or additional questions was left open. Please see Appendix F for a list of key questions used for the interview.

The qualitative analysis of the various sampling elements builds the foundation for measuring the results of the case study against the paradigm established in the literature review. The sampling elements are described, analyzed, and classified according to the theoretical framework contained in the literature review. Context was considered, as the political education effort to be studied took place at the same time as a general election campaign. Much information already exists describing the outcome of the political education

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<sup>8</sup> During the time period under study, Dr. Pilon taught at the University of Victoria.

campaign, so discussion will focus on how the outcome resulted from the sampling elements, and consider why it did or did not succeed.

### **Ethical considerations**

As a human subject was involved in the present research, ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Ottawa Human Research Ethics Committee. Please see Appendix G for the certificate of ethics approval.

## Literature Review

According to Weiss and Tschirhart (1994: 82), public information campaigns are “one way that government officials deliberately attempt to shape public attitudes, values, or behaviour in the hope of reaching some desirable social outcome.” McGuire (1989: 62) adds that they “are designed to manipulate people to do something other than what they are initially inclined to do,” but something that the campaigner feels “would be for the public good.” For the purposes of this research paper, public information campaigns are used to increase awareness and education levels among a population, and are not to be confused with *social marketing campaigns* whose primary purpose is change behaviour or sell products. A change in the *knowledge level* of the general public tends to be the chief goal of a public information campaign. A modification in beliefs or attitudes, or the encouragement of a change in lifestyle, may be a goal of some public information campaigns (Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland, n.d.), but certainly not all. Weiss and Tschirhart (1994: 84) suggest that for an information campaign to be “public,” it would necessarily be conducted by a government institution. With private enterprise concerned with pleasing shareholders and not-for-profits inevitably harbouring some sort of agenda – benevolent or otherwise – the public institutions that would most likely engage in public information campaigns are bound to be neutral.

Grier and Bryant (2005: 319) posit that a social marketing campaign involves the use of marketing<sup>9</sup> to design and implement programs to promote socially beneficial behaviour change. They cite (Ibid) as examples campaigns in the United States to increase fruit and vegetable consumption, promote breastfeeding, decrease fat consumption and promote

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<sup>9</sup> *Marketing* is defined by Kotler and Zaltman (1971) as an exchange process. They note (Ibid: 4) that “marketing does not occur unless there are two or more parties, each with something to exchange, and both able to carry out communications and distribution.”

physical activity. Corporations and not-for-profits frequently engage in such campaigns as well, for their own purposes, with the litany of television commercials, billboards, flyers, phone calls and surveys that citizens experience these days being parts of much larger, heavily-managed marketing operations. Complex and professional campaign design typically accompanies such efforts.

As with their social marketing counterparts, public information campaigns should be strategic in their approach. Primary components include planning, research, campaign development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation (Dooley, Jones & Desmarais, 2009: 33). These activities can be quite costly, and significant resources are required, along with meticulous execution. Weiss and Tschirhart (1994: 90) outline four key objectives for a successful public information campaign, after reviewing 100 government-sponsored and directed public information campaign efforts:

1. Capture the attention of the right audience.
2. Deliver a credible message that audiences understand.
3. Deliver a message that influences the beliefs or understanding of the audience.
4. Create social contexts that lead toward desired outcomes.

### **Task 1: Capture the attention of the right audience**

For the purposes of a referendum held in a democratic state, the audience would necessarily be the voting population. While most campaigns on political issues are carried out with partisan goals in mind, with political parties using targeted advertising buys to win the support of key constituencies (Lees-Marshment, 2011), because electoral reform is a universal issue and the communicator a non-partisan public sector organization, the ideal

situation would be to see every voter adequately educated. The population should have access to sufficient information to make an informed decision, even if that decision may be to not vote at all. Referendums can allow citizens to take part in policy decisions, but these citizens must be equipped with the competence to make an informed choice (De Vreese & Semetko, 2004). Simply telling people to vote is insufficient as “uneducated” voting tends to work in favour of the status quo rather than reform (Hazell & Chalmers, 2010), biasing the results of the exercise. Bennett (1989) states, “An informed citizenry, able to appreciate its interests and make intelligent judgments, is essential to democracy.”

Attracting the public’s attention can be difficult. Mendelsohn (1973: 61) argues, “There is considerable resistance among various publics against being moved away from their comfortable indifference to many public issues.” He does highlight (Ibid: 50) however that extensive research has shown that those most receptive to information messages tend to have a prior interest in the subject areas presented. Therefore, he suggests (Ibid), “information directed to this segment of a potential audience requires totally different communications strategies and tactics from information that is to be disseminated to an audience that is initially indifferent.” Public sector communicators should recognize, understand, and attempt to overcome citizen apathy (Ibid), but unfortunately, within a population, there exist what Hyman and Sheatsley (1947, 413) refer to as the “chronic ‘know-nothings.’” Research shows that a certain proportion of the population tends not to be aware of events, no matter how widely distributed was the information. This “uninformed” group is much harder to reach, and to affect. Their lack of knowledge cannot be solved simply by making more information available. (Ibid)

While a public institution would be expected to make information available to the entire citizenry, it is reasonable to allow for it to target its educational resources especially at those most likely to *absorb* and *act upon* the information. The principle is akin to private sector marketing programs, which would not be focused on less profitable segments of the population. However, the public institution faces a dilemma, as it is charged with spending tax dollars wisely and efficiently, while also being responsible to the hardest-to-reach segments of society. (Solomon, 1989) Awareness materials related to such programs as employment insurance and old-age pensions are made available on an ongoing basis in Canadian society, and would more easily net the attention of the population by virtue of the personal stake citizens know they have in such programs.

Certain constituencies could be expected to be more aware than others of the various electoral systems used across the democratic world, so a public information campaign about a referendum on electoral reform may need to especially target some segments of the population so as to not simply “preach to the converted,” so to speak. For example, studies show that, within a population, urban dwellers tend to be more aware than rural dwellers of current events. Additionally, some citizens are simply more motivated than others to learn and further their understanding of the world. (Hyman & Sheatsley, 1947) On matters such as electoral reform, if Ontario voting rates are any indication,<sup>10</sup> there is a large swath of the population that will not be predisposed to learning about the process. Much time and funding is necessary if the information is to reach everyone. If there are unalterable time or financial constraints at play, the goal should be to educate to the greatest extent possible.

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<sup>10</sup> According to Global Toronto (2011), voter turnout in the October 2011 provincial election in Ontario was 49.02%, the lowest since Confederation in 1867.

English (2007, cited in Lees-Marshment, 2011) has noted that one must be quite inventive and clever in order to properly and effectively explain political or policy issues. As referred to above, front-end research using focus groups can provide guidance as to whether potential audiences would comprehend and be convinced by the proposed main messages or advertising (Ibid). The Conservative Party of Canada, as documented by Flanagan (2009), has engaged in extensive market research since 2004, allowing it to understand Canadians' overt and latent needs and desires, and the party has crafted its advertising toward winning the support of specific segments of the electorate and targeting "winnable" ridings while ignoring lost causes. In a referendum campaign situation, this could translate into focusing fewer resources on attempting to attract the interest of the "chronic know-nothings." At least making the information available to everyone is the base step towards giving the audience the option of participating in the democratic process.

Certain seeming shortcuts may in fact do little to increase awareness. For example, with public information campaigns frequently being conducted by cash-strapped not-for-profit or public sector organizations, there may be a tendency to rely on *donated* media time or space to gain exposure (Coffman, 2003). Such dependence may prove to be a substantial handicap. For example, one campaign to address adolescent drug use relied on television ads that were broadcast only in the early morning hours, when few adolescents were watching (Weiss & Tschirhart, 1994). Consideration must be given to media schedules and willingness to air content that does not bring in revenue, or reluctance to place free advertisements in areas of a newspaper that are in high demand. Relying solely on donated time or space can severely limit a campaign's effectiveness.

Market research can help gauge the potential effectiveness of campaign communication materials *before* significant monies are spent – this is known as “front-end research” (Coffman, 2003: 14). This approach can help identify which audiences are most lacking in awareness, which would be most receptive to the communication media to be employed and how best to target resources to ensure maximum effect. For example, campaigns to coax people out of their vehicles and onto public transit would presumably be more effective in different environments and demographics, and this can be verified pre-campaign through market research.

The communication of complex material can be expected to be best understood when individuals are paying a high degree of attention, so placing public service announcements in movie theatres among the previews, telephoning citizens directly, or going door-to-door could be considered highly effective, if costly, communication vehicles. These strategies would accompany more standard measures such as household mailers, news media advertising, an online presence, community events and coalition building (Coffman, 2003). To complement the traditional mass media, online campaigns may disseminate information more broadly than conventional channels, especially in the age of Facebook and Twitter, and electronic outreach can extend public debate beyond narrow audience segments (Weiss & Tschirhart, 1994). Ethnic media can also reach demographics that may be missed by other means, and producing material in multiple languages would go hand-in-hand with such a venture.

According to Bennett and Iyengar (2008), in the era of fragmented publics, consumers exercise greater choice over both the content of the messages and the media sources, so effects become increasingly difficult to produce or measure in the aggregate,

creating new challenges for theory and research. They add that the cost of producing even minimal media effects in campaigns has soared dramatically, raising questions about the efficacy of conventionally conceived persuasion or information campaigns. As an indicator of today's shattered audience is the fact that in the 1960s, an advertiser could reach 80% of American women with a prime-time spot on the three major networks, while today (2006 data) it is estimated that the same spot would have to run on 100 television channels to reach the same number of viewers. (Ibid) A variety of ways and means to communicate must be employed if a public information campaign is to have any hope of reaching the widespread, fragmented and diverse audience of today.

For example, television and radio may have wide distribution, but they are not conducive to carrying complex messages. Newspapers perform better in this regard, with more space for explanatory information. Magazines can help to reach narrow population segments, and also offer the potential of additional readership through such channels as being shared at a doctor's office. Billboards and transit advertisements can be used to reach commuters. (Alcalay & Taplin, 1989) The use of social media continues to increase, and is arguably the most promising manner by which to reach younger demographics. If the goal is to ensure exposure to as much of the total population as possible, and to capture its attention, each of these communication means must be used.

## **Task 2: Deliver a credible message that audiences understand**

Public information campaigns should deliver messages that are "clear, credible, and easy to understand" (Weiss & Tschirhart, 1994: 87). Key steps toward success include exposure, attention, comprehension, learning and reinforcing (McGuire, 1989). These can be

a challenge with complex content such as an electoral system, especially when much of the information will be received through the news media filter, or must be crammed into a thirty-second radio commercial. Hyman and Sheatsley (1947) suggest that those who are exposed to information tend to exhibit an increased interest in acquiring more details, so following initial exposure with repeated distribution of that information in additional detail is necessary. A certain amount of time would also necessarily be required in order to make sure that messaging “sinks in,” and the timeframes and audience penetration can vary depending on the social contexts (e.g. holiday periods, times of war, and other distractions).

Lees-Marshment (2011) warns that conveying complex policy can be difficult because, in the era of sound bites, media coverage is not conducive to in-depth discussion. Weiss and Tschirhart (1994: 87) also note the difficulty of “conveying a complex message that a mass audience will understand.” Lees-Marshment (2011) recommends that communication be kept simple – that two or three key messages should be used, and repeated. As former US Democratic Party pollster Mark Mellman notes, “The voters we are talking to are not very interested in what we have to say. [...] It’s therefore very important in campaigns to say things over and over again” (Kinsella, 2001: 217). Reach and frequency are both key considerations if a campaigner wants to ensure retention of information (Solomon, 1989). Weiss and Tschirhart (1994) warn that repeating the message ad nauseam may be still not be enough as, according to one case study, even messages repeatedly warning of the impending eruption of Mount Saint Helens were not completely understood (Ibid). Confusion can arise in the case of referendums, whereby elites *within* political parties may be on opposing sides, and so short cuts in the form of ideological or partisan cues may not be available (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998, cited in Leduc, 2011). According to De Vreese and

Semetko (2004: 171), “Given the potential low public involvement, lack of knowledge, and ambiguity of elite cues, campaign communication may therefore be unusually important to a referendum outcome.” So, how to best communicate a seemingly dull subject like electoral reform?

Messaging must be simple and easily remembered. When it comes to complicated and politically-charged topics, elaborate presentations may only serve to exacerbate inequalities in access to information between the well-educated and the rest of the population, as the material may be more readily understood and used by those most interested and able to learn. However, proper campaign execution can actually reduce this inequality, since the highly educated are typically well-informed both before and after campaigns, while the less well-educated may make the greatest gain from exposure to the information. (Weiss & Tschirhart, 1994) Weiss and Tschirhart (Ibid: 87) warn, however, that messaging will be better received “when it extends or elaborates what people already know,” rather than introducing new and unfamiliar content. The nature of the subject matter can make a significant difference in the receptivity of the audience.

The advantage of paid versus earned media is that the advertiser has the chance to clearly deliver the key messages, unaltered by what may be a biased journalistic filter. Advertisements mean control of the content, although to draw attention one must limit the amount of text within it, allowing for large font and illustrations to increase the likelihood of catching the eye of the reader (De Vreese & Semetko, 2004). While contributing to news reporting is certainly important, using paid media to disseminate to-the-point messaging can be an extremely valuable and effective vehicle, especially when it comes to using simple messaging to communicate complex policy. Neustadt (1997: 97) argues that the press “is

very much an actor in today's political drama, conveying a steady stream of unambiguously negative cues about government and politics." More objective information through advertising can help to counter the effects of potentially hostile news media, or complementing coverage that may not give the "full picture."

Setting up a telephone hotline or website Q&A interface is also an opportunity to repeat key messages and combat voter confusion over complex policy proposals. For example, a hotline set up by STOP IT NOW! VERMONT, a movement against child sexual abuse, found that setting up a telephone hotline was a valuable tool in increasing public awareness (Coffman, 2003). Having a well-known spokesperson on each side of the debate can be beneficial as well, such as Wayne Gretzky's representation of Tylenol, which enjoyed a high level of awareness among Canadians (Wong & Trumper, 2002). Smokey the Bear is often cited as an example of a tremendous public relations success, with an extremely high awareness rate of the bear and his message. The strategy entailed a consistent message and icon, high exposure to the public, involvement of the audience on a personal level, an appeal to their values, and an array of public exhibits. While long-term results were not so successful, in terms of the message carrying on to the next generation, it worked extremely well in generating short-term awareness. (Rice, 1989)

In a referendum campaign situation, with complex content that many citizens would inevitably find dreary, messages must be delivered in an innovative and exciting manner to maximize their chances of being retained in the minds of the viewing public. A manner must be found to make complex issues relevant to the everyday voter and, at the end of a referendum campaign, if citizens opt to reject a change option before them, it should be due

to informed opposition to the choice, not to a lack of knowledge, or a poorly written or slanted ballot question.

**Task 3: Deliver a message that influences the beliefs or understanding of the audience**

The message must be disseminated so as to not only be presented to an audience, but received and absorbed as well (Hyman & Sheatsley, 1947). Content must be relevant, “appealing to the values and cost-benefits of individuals, rather than abstract collective benefits” (Rice & Atkin, 1989: 10). In their analysis of 100 public education campaigns, Weiss and Tschirhart (1994) found that 94 of the cases pursued a strategy of using *new* information to grab the viewer’s attention. Daily or weekly “alerts” with new information about the issue at hand may help draw in the target population, and even make them anticipate the next instalment. Social media and traditional mass media can help to further disseminate the messaging, as “public service announcements.”

Leduc et al. (2008) warn that the advantage in referendum campaigns involving significant change may inherently rest with the “No” side, as rather than make a coherent case against it, simply raising doubts in the minds of voters, instilling fear of the unknown and perhaps questioning the motives of the advocates can sway enough people to prevent the proposed change. The “Yes” side, in contrast, must educate as well as persuade a frequently skeptical and risk-averse population to support change (Leduc, 2011). A public institution, representing all taxpayers, is nevertheless obliged to ensure that the information is accessible to everyone, and made available on a level that everyone can understand, via media that everyone can utilize. While it must take care that information on both sides is made available in an objective manner, it should be cognizant of the fact that the “devil you know” factor

may mean that the dissemination of information about a proposed change may need to be prioritized over that of the status quo in order to facilitate widespread knowledge of each of the choices.

There will inevitably be significant barriers to overcome in educating a busy, distracted public. Quelch and Jacz argue (2007: 174) that, with “the stakes high and the choice irrevocable, voters seemingly should be motivated to search for detailed information” about the choice before them. However, as noted by Canadian political strategist Warren Kinsella (2001: 217), “During an average day during an average campaign, voters spend far more time contemplating the availability of parking spaces than they do the minutiae of a party’s policy platform.” A subject such as electoral reform, likely much further removed from the average citizen’s life than the tax or health care policies contained in a party platform, can face even greater hurdles on the road to public understanding. Despite the complexity of the content, the ramification of the decision requires communication in such a way that people will pay attention and realize that they have a stake in the outcome.

The use of market research *during* the campaign can also be an asset, as an organization can determine the impact of efforts thus far and in what fashion resources could be shifted so as to increase the effect of the campaign. Focus groups and opinion polls can help gauge the success rate of one communication medium over another, or the awareness level/change of one demographic over another. Monitoring and evaluation should be an ongoing process during a campaign, allowing for the refinement of the approach as it continues.

All of the above require adequate financial resources, and an adequate time period. Delivering key messages and complex policy details to citizens, with sufficient volume and

frequency to make certain that this content is thoroughly understood, is becoming more and more costly. Having well-funded Yes and No camps can also help with voter understanding, as rather than providing neutral, high-level information as a public institution would be expected to do, advocates of various positions will provide arguments for their position that may be more easily understood and relatable to by average citizens. Decentralizing information dissemination to such groups has been demonstrated to increase the success of outreach efforts (see for example Vedung, 1999).

Looking at the 2000 Danish referendum on adopting the euro, the equivalent of 4.7 million euros were collectively spent by the Yes and No organizations, and that amount was supplemented by millions more spent by the political parties. A similar referendum in Sweden saw the government allocate 10 million euros to the campaign, split between the Yes and No campaigns, with a smaller amount divided among the political parties represented in their legislature. (De Vreese & Semetko, 2004: 53) Providing equal funding to Yes and No campaigns is a way to encourage public debate for a government institution that is itself bound to remain neutral. While a neutrality mandate can instil an aversion to “dumbing down” the language for fear of being accused of bias, Yes and No camps have no objection to appearing biased.

#### **Task 4: Create social contexts that lead toward desired outcomes**

Weiss and Tschirhart (1994) argue that the intended outcomes of public information campaigns may involve changes in social behaviour and awareness through the reshaping of what individuals think. In recent years, Ontario, Québec and British Columbia all instituted mandatory high school civics classes, which emphasize citizenship responsibility (Kennelly,

2009) and aim to develop more politically educated young people with an active interest in having their voices heard at the ballot box. Early intervention such as this can help ensure a civically aware population that could be expected to be more receptive to political education campaigns and adult civic learning.

Looking at the adult level, working through employers and community groups can increase the visibility of a public information campaign. For example, Atlanta's Voluntary Ozone Action Program, aimed at raising awareness of air quality issues and encouraging behaviour to reduce the city's air pollution (and ground level ozone in particular) promoted workplace activities around the campaign and pursued employer partnerships. Events such as contests with donated prizes can be helpful motivators. In this case, even the Governor got on board, issuing an executive order in 1997 for all public institutions to reduce the rate of single occupancy vehicles by 20 percent. (Coffman, 2003) Government should lead by example, especially in cases where the information campaign is being conducted by the public sector.

Public institutions conducting public information campaigns must also be cognizant of the population's social contexts. Efforts to educate a population on a given issue may be less impactful if conducted during inconvenient times – such as during the summer or Christmas holiday period, or following major disasters, such as 9/11. Investing monies in a public information campaign during such times may greatly decrease the efficacy of such expenditures with regard to changing awareness levels.

As referred to above, having well-funded Yes and No campaigns in a referendum situation helps to complement a public institution's neutral information with debate as to the pros and cons of each choice. Language can be simplified without the necessity of avoiding

bias, making complex material easier to understanding and encouraging public debate, and hopefully discussions at the water cooler, at the dinner table, etc. The information must be presented in a way that accommodates social contexts.

### **Media advocacy**

The Weiss and Tschirhart model neglects to address what in the author's opinion is a key component of any public information campaign: media advocacy. Vedung (2009: 248) agrees that "mass media support is absolutely necessary for a public information campaign to succeed." The news media can in fact be a significant factor in the outcome of a campaign, widening or closing the knowledge gaps that may exist between different populations (Alcalay & Taplin, 1989), and it is only through working with reporters can a campaigner hope to coax coverage toward increasing the knowledge of various populations. Through the presentation of their model, Weiss & Tschirhart (1994) make repeated reference to the importance of paid media exposure, especially in the context of tasks one and three above, and although they do opaquely refer to the mass media's "comparative advantages as an instrument of influence" (Ibid: 89), they do not directly address the necessity of media advocacy. There is no mention of proactive media strategy, such as using communications products including news releases, media advisories and letters to the editor to invite earned media coverage.

### **Political education campaigns**

The present study will focus on what will be considered a subunit of public information campaign theory: non-partisan *political education campaigns*. Public

information campaigns can be about any number of topics, but political education campaigns serve the more specific purpose of “educating for democracy,” i.e. producing informed and responsible citizens capable of making decisions for themselves – without any coercion – in relation to politics, and this is not to be confused with “political education” in the sense of indoctrination by totalitarian regimes (Roberts, 2002). Gutmann (1987: 287) defines political education as the “cultivation of the virtues, knowledge and skills necessary for political participation.” Political education campaigns can “enrich the possibilities for democratic participation,” since a more informed citizenry “may participate more knowledgeably and effectively in all democratic processes” (Weiss & Tschirhart, 1994: 99). Gastil (2008: 4) warns of the pitfalls of a society of “zombie voters” with no inkling of what they are voting for, and while such a portrait may seem rather pessimistic, he does point out the example of a survey taken shortly before the 2004 US presidential election, whereby two thirds of supporters of George W. Bush believed that he supported banning nuclear weapons testing and participating in the Kyoto Protocol – two policies the president openly opposed. A true democracy, Gastil (Ibid) adds, must include three criteria: inclusion, participation opportunities and enlightened understanding. To elaborate:

- Inclusion: A democracy must “satisfy the criterion of inclusion by welcoming into its political process all adults who exist within its boundaries” (Gastil, 2008: 4). To exclude people from the decision-making process renders a society undemocratic, but is a lack of political education not leading to such exclusion, simply via another route? (Ibid: 5)
- Participation opportunities: A direct or representative democracy must include opportunities to vote and to participate in debate (Ibid). A political education

campaign including citizen forums, public presentations, debates, and information sessions with question and answer periods can help boost awareness and, by extension, participation.

- Enlightened understanding: Members of the public should become well-informed enough to act out of “enlightened self-interest,” and should be able to adequately explain their views, and reasoning, as well as that of their opponents (Ibid: 7).

Well-known political theorist Robert Dahl (2004) concurs that these three elements are vital to a healthy democracy. Citizens need these democratic tools, and political education campaigns can “break down barriers between experts and citizens, demystifying bureaucracy and empowering genuine participation” in issues of the day (Weiss & Tschirhart, 1994: 99).

According to Weiss and Tschirhart (1994), such information campaigns can enhance the richness and fairness of the debate because the involvement of neutral public officials can permit arguments to be heard that may otherwise be drowned out by the volume of communication coming from entrenched interests. They add (Ibid: 87), “When the campaign message appears to come from a source that members of the target audience find credible, the message itself may be more credible.” Still, the fact that the message in the case study is coming from a public institution rather than a political party does not negate the fact that the subject matter is political in nature, and may therefore be treated with a certain cynicism. However, one could hope that public sector institutions would find that their messages carry increased legitimacy, as they would be coming from nonaligned civil servants rather than self-serving politicians. A political system can be easily corrupted should governments use the process to self-promote and manipulate the public (Weiss & Tschirhart, 1994), so political education campaigns would ideally be conducted by a neutral body, so as to not lead

citizens to believe they are being exposed to propaganda. Communication must be crafted to assure actual and perceived neutrality.

Given the volume of campaigns upon which their study is based, Weiss and Tschirhart's model has been used by numerous other scholars looking at public information campaigns (see for example Vedung, 2009, Fischer, 2002 and Henry & Gordon, 2003). Further, this model was designed specifically for public information campaigns sponsored or directed by government, and a majority of the campaigns studied by Weiss and Tschirhart (1994) were aimed at the general public, as opposed to certain target groups. Therefore, this model will be used in the case study analysis that follows, along with support from the works of Gastil, Coffman, and Hyman and Sheatsley. Several scholars (see for example Pilon, 2009) have criticized the campaign of Elections Ontario to educate the populace about the referendum choice it faced, and the analysis to follow of the various aspects of the awareness effort will help to illustrate what might have been done differently in order to realize a more successful campaign and, by extension, legitimate democratic vote.

## **Case Study: The Ontario Campaign**

The Liberal Party of Ontario won the 2003 provincial election promising to hold a referendum on electoral reform and, although the Liberals kept their promise, their initiation of the CAER came so late in their mandate that it was unclear whether there would be sufficient time for the assembly's work and a public information campaign to inform the citizenry of the decision (Leduc, 2011). No doubt sensitive to charges of broken promises in light of its flip-flop on tax increases, the government made certain to implement its promise on electoral reform.

Elections Ontario sent 120,000 letters to voters to gauge interest in participating in the Citizens' Assembly. Of the slightly more than 7,000 who agreed, 1,253 were invited to attend a selection meeting. The final 103 members were selected by random draw. (Stephenson & Tanguay, 2009) The Assembly's members each represented one of Ontario's 103 constituencies (Elections Ontario [EO], 2008a). Eight months of learning and deliberation ensued (Leduc, 2011), following which the CAER on May 15, 2007 officially recommended a switch to the Mixed Member Proportional electoral system (EO, 2008a). Pilon (2009: 1) notes that the announcement "moved the discussion out of the university seminar-like setting of the Ontario Citizens Assembly into the realm of public debate and vested political interests." Elections Ontario was charged with spearheading what Pilon (Ibid: 2) calls the "second round" of deliberation on the issue, which would encompass the general population. Just under five months was allotted for the public to learn about and discuss the choice they faced.

By way of Bill 218,<sup>11</sup> passed on June 4, 2007, the Chief Electoral Officer (the senior official within Elections Ontario) was given a mandate to “conduct a program of public education, to ensure that electors throughout Ontario receive clear and impartial information” relating to the referendum process, the question, and the content of the choices (EO, 2008a: IV). The referendum question<sup>12</sup> was decided via an Order in Council, and included reference to the “alternative” MMP system “proposed by the Citizens’ Assembly” (Ibid: 4). Premier Dalton McGuinty insisted that, since millions had been spent on the CAER, reference to the Assembly must appear in the referendum question (Jonathan Rose, personal communication, March 15, 2013). This wording bestowed upon Elections Ontario the responsibility of increasing awareness of the CAER’s work at the same time as educating Ontarians on the SMP and MMP electoral systems. While the CAER had had the luxury of many months to analyze and deliberate on the various systems, the late launch of the political education campaign meant that the general population had only a matter of weeks – and those weeks were simultaneously consumed by a general election.

Prior to the campaign, Elections Ontario assessed the public environment. Ipsos Reid Public Affairs was contracted for survey research. The level of public awareness and interest in the CAER and electoral reform in general was perceived to be very low. Initial market research found that, in late June, there was a “huge vacuum when it [came] to Ontarians’ awareness and knowledge about the Referendum and the alternative system being proposed (MMP).” It was also determined that Ontarians even had “a general lack of understanding” about the existing SMP system, and many were unaware even that an election was being held in October, despite the 2004 imposition by the Liberal government of fixed election dates.

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<sup>11</sup> To view the text of Bill 218, please visit [http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/source/statutes/english/2007/elaws\\_src\\_s07015\\_e.htm](http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/source/statutes/english/2007/elaws_src_s07015_e.htm).

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix B for the wording of the referendum question.

(EO, 2008a: 8) Only 8% of electors felt knowledgeable about the referendum. Elections Ontario set a target of increasing that number to 75% by voting day. (Ibid: VI) The organization sought strategic advice from counterparts in New Zealand, who had also conducted referendums on electoral reform. They agreed that “electoral systems are not ‘top of mind’ for many electors most of the time, but are of fundamental importance to them when they become engaged.” They felt that the success of an education program required voters to become interested in electoral reform, and that the best way to do that was through an “appeal to their emotions.” (Ibid: 6) The three main objectives were “to create awareness, to simplify the concept and educate electors, and to drive electors to action” (Ibid: 9).

Post-election research done in 2003 found that a core group of approximately 26% of eligible voters were “either disaffected and opposed and will not participate in the electoral process, or who are so uninterested and require such a high degree of motivation that they are unlikely to participate in elections” (EO, 2008a: 9). These would be considered the “know-nothings” referred to by Hyman and Sheatsley (1947: 413). This is why Elections Ontario settled on the 75% target referred to above. It is worth noting, however, that the agency’s own strategic plan includes a commitment to “reach *all* [emphasis added] Ontarians with information they need about Ontario’s electoral process, the right to vote and how to be a candidate” (EO, 2008b).

No provincial referendum had previously been held since 1924 and, as such, Elections Ontario did not have experience, nor a standing educational mandate, and so could not rely on past experience to guide its information campaign (EO, 2008a). It was decided that Elections Ontario would “focus tightly” on its mandate in this instance, as the expectation was that fulsome public discussions would be initiated by supporters and

opponents of the MMP system (Ibid: 7). Funding of \$6.8 million was budgeted to increase awareness (Pilon, 2009), although in the end, almost \$7.9 million<sup>13</sup> was spent on the campaign (EO, 2008a).

The organization contracted an advertising agency to help develop its television, newspaper and web advertising campaign throughout July and August,<sup>14</sup> and the campaign was officially launched around Labour Day. The eight main elements of the campaign included broadcast, print, posters, direct mail, online advertising, website, call centre and public relations. Some radio advertisements ran in August and three direct mailings were sent to all households and registered electors over the course of the campaign, including two householders<sup>15</sup> sent directly to electors and a third inserted in the Notice of Registration Card that went to each voter (Garnett, 2012). As the voter registration cards had to be sent to voters anyway, due to the general election, it was little trouble to piggyback referendum information along with the mailing.

In terms of advertising channels, a decision was made to invest in new media as well as use extensively traditional print and electronic channels. Key search terms were acquired to ensure that the referendum appeared prominently among relevant search results in Google and other search engines. Advertising was purchased on a number of high-traffic websites and, over the course of the campaign, advertising was shifted away from underperforming websites towards more productive ones. A functional website ([www.referendumontario.on.ca](http://www.referendumontario.on.ca)) was available to the public as of mid-July, and content was added over the subsequent months. On August 1, a second website ([www.yourbigdecision.ca](http://www.yourbigdecision.ca)) was launched, as was the [www.votredecision.ca](http://www.votredecision.ca) French version.

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix A for a detailed list of expenditures.

<sup>14</sup> For the purposes of this research paper, all dates without years refer to 2007.

<sup>15</sup> See Appendix C for an example of a householder that was sent.

In all, close to \$1 million was spent on online activities, compared with approximately \$3.74 million for radio, television and print advertisements. (EO, 2008a)

The political education campaign also attempted community outreach through local liaisons to the agency. A Referendum Resource Officer (RRO) was hired for 106 of the 107 constituencies (Garnett, 2012) and tasked with travelling their respective regions to explain the proposed new system to voters. They personally presented approximately 3,000 information sessions, attending such events as fall fairs, the Canadian National Exhibition (CNE), and all-candidates debates, and they also made presentations at religious centres and private homes. They further completed media interviews, created and distributed podcasts, and dropped brochures in locations ranging from retirement homes to retail stores. (EO, 2008a) Chief Electoral Officer John Hollins referred to the RRO program as part of the agency's "small-town approach" (Vallis, 2007a).

Early in the campaign, Elections Ontario realized that the details of the referendum choices could not be delivered effectively through a 30-second television or radio commercial. This initiated a difficult process of simplifying and shortening their communication. Seven academics agreed to assist Elections Ontario with this task, and their contributions were provided by early July. Early focus group testing found that many electors immediately associated "referendum" with Quebec, and so a decision was made to brand the campaign as "Ontario's Referendum." Getting focus groups to understand the SMP and MMP electoral systems, even with clear explanations, was even more difficult, and usually elicited "puzzled confusion." (EO, 2008a: 11) Significant resources and time were spent simplifying the language. A consultant hired to assist broke the materials down to a Grade 6.5 reading level, but in the process some of the concepts became inaccurate or unclear. The

intellectual content was therefore kept at a level equivalent to at least Grade 9. (Ibid: 12) See Appendix C for an example.

The mandate of neutrality was also interpreted by Elections Ontario to mean that they needed to attempt to provide explanations of equal length on the two electoral systems on the ballot. They found that the MMP system required more words to explain, but were able to make the explanations appear reasonably equal by using a tabular presentation. Focus group testing found that the word “change” had emotive undertones, whether positive or negative, and so “choice” was used instead. (EO, 2008a: 12)

“Understand the question” and “It’s a big decision” were the main campaign slogans used in publicity, and Ontarians were encouraged to visit the website or consult the household mailers to educate themselves on the choice (Garnett, 2012: 5). The “take-away” messages of the TV and radio spots were that there would be a referendum in Ontario, it would happen October 10, it was about electoral reform, and electors needed to find out more by calling Elections Ontario or visiting the website (EO, 2008a: 14).

The public relations strategy employed four major thrusts (EC, 2008: 26):

- Exploiting multiple media channels to create varying voter contact points
- Creating ongoing opportunities to repeat and reinforce education information
- Allowing for direct voter feedback and contact
- Maintaining maximum media accessibility and neutrality

Their media outreach program resulted in over 1,000 personal calls to Ontario news media over the course of the campaign, including campus, ethnic and Aboriginal outlets. In September, the Chief Electoral Officer and the Deputy Chief Electoral Officer proactively met with the editorial boards of the *Toronto Star*, *National Post* and The Canadian Press. Six

bilingual news releases were issued, spaced out between August 1 and October 10, two bilingual matte stories were distributed online, and the blogosphere was monitored by the PR contractor in order to correct erroneous information and provide updated campaign information. Over 1,700 personal e-mails were responded to, the Facebook page attracted 755 members, and the Elections Ontario YouTube channel videos were viewed by 2,517 people. (EO, 2008a) According to Elections Ontario, “In 2007, less than 1% of Canadians were engaged on Twitter and that informed our approach to use Facebook and Youtube as primary social media drivers” (personal communication, March 21, 2013).

In light of a relative absence of public debate as the campaign progressed, media coverage was supplemented by a television debate held on September 27 on TVOntario, and moderated by Steve Paikin of “The Agenda.” The debate was also subsequently posted online by Elections Ontario so those who missed it could access it. (EO, 2008a)

Post-referendum studies commissioned by Elections Ontario found that, of those who actually did vote in the referendum, 85% felt that they were somewhat or very knowledgeable about the issue, and that drops to 76% when all electors are considered (Ibid: 34). In light of their target of having 75% of electors being aware of and feeling informed about the referendum, Elections Ontario argues (Ibid: 1) that, “according to the opinions of electors, [it] delivered on its mandate,” which was to “educate Ontario electors on the timing, the question, the process and the content” of the referendum choices (Ibid: IV).

## **Discussion**

Elections Ontario clearly demonstrated some successes and some failures in its political education campaign on the electoral reform referendum. The agency freely acknowledges some of the impediments its outreach faced, and there has been much analysis of its strategy. This discussion will review the present study's findings in the context of the Weiss and Tschirhart model outlined above.

### **Task 1: Capture the attention of the right audience**

The Report of the Chief Electoral Officer on the 2007 referendum qualified the political education campaign as having achieved its “awareness objective” (EO, 2008a: 34). However, the agency interpreted its market research in such a way as to be in a position to report success – “85% of [voters] reported that they felt that they were somewhat or very knowledgeable about it” (Ibid: VI). Unfortunately, this declaration ignores that fact that citizens who did not vote in the referendum campaign are not counted within the statistic, and for many the decision not to vote was presumably tied to a lack of education on the choice on the ballot. Using statistics based only on those who voted allowed Elections Ontario to reach a rosy but misleading conclusion. Looking at the agency's own market research, on October 10, just 57% of eligible electors felt that they had enough knowledge to cast a referendum vote. Although a vast improvement on the 18% that registered in June, the result is still a far cry from the 75% target. (Ibid: 41)

Market research conducted in late June by Elections Ontario found that 70% of Ontarians, when asked whether they planned to vote in the election, said “definitely will” (EO, 2008a: 40). And yet, only 52.6% of eligible voters turned up (Canadian Broadcasting

Corporation, 2007b). Elections Ontario admits that this 70% figure was “obviously inflated,” and yet, there is no similar admission that the statistic of 57% of voters claiming to have adequate knowledge of the referendum choices may also have been inflated (EO, 2008a: 40). People may have different interpretations of what qualifies as ignorance, and many may be hesitant to tell a pollster that they know little or nothing about the subject. When asked about these figures, the agency declined to comment, saying that it “does not specialize in market research” (personal communication, March 21, 2013). While conducting a post-mortem is certainly advisable, an evaluation by an independent body can help to verify the conclusions without the appearance of bias. Jonathan Rose criticized the lack of “measurable, independent means by which we can demonstrate people have learned” (personal communication, March 15, 2013).

Elections Ontario (2008a) was self-congratulatory on its web presence during the public information drive. The website [www.yourbigdecision.ca](http://www.yourbigdecision.ca) received approximately 555,000 hits during the campaign, of which 80% came from online advertising clicks (EO, 2008a). This means that fewer than 120,000 of those visits were from people typing in the information contained on the referendum campaign mailings, hardly a stunning figure out of 18 million pieces that were sent (Ibid: 32). Approximately 94% of the total web hits were classified as “unique visits,” but as the data presented by Elections Ontario (Ibid: 53) was broken down by day, it is possible that much of these “unique” visitors checked the website on multiple occasions during the campaign, inflating the numbers. When asked to clarify, Elections Ontario indicated that they “no longer have information on how these statistics were compiled,” and said that, in 2007, “website tracking was limited” (personal communication, March 21, 2013).

One of Elections Ontario's principal campaign objectives was to provide print materials that could be retained and reviewed at the convenience of the reader. Rather than simply send junk mail, why were ideas such as a refrigerator magnet or an auto freshener not considered? These are examples of something that would be seen every day, and have been shown to be effective in other awareness campaigns (see for example Solomon, 1989). Elections Ontario used unaddressed admail in brochure format (EO, 2008a: 16). A Canadian Marketing Study found that one-quarter of Canadians discard junk mail without reading it, and only one-third find junk mail of interest to them (Flyer Distribution Standards Association, 2007), so enclosing a magnet may have nudged some of this group (and certainly many among the 75% who do not automatically discard junk mail) to put it up on the refrigerator, especially since it would only be there for a month. Such minute gestures can make a significant difference (Rice & Atkin, 1989).

Despite Elections Ontario's best efforts, academic research shows that Ontarians were simply "in the dark" about what was going on with the referendum (Cutler & Fournier, 2007). The target audience was not reached. At the outset of the public education campaign, half of Ontarians admitted to knowing nothing about the CAER, and academic research found there to be no gain in the awareness level over the course of the campaign (Ibid). Leduc et al. (2008: 33) believe that the Ontario government "made no effort to publicize the deliberation process, or defend and explain its merit while the assembly was in session." The Ontario media's news coverage was minimal (Hoff, 2009) and, as a result, the Ontario CAER was an "unknown entity" for most people, and the proposed reform was accordingly deprived of a certain amount of legitimacy (Leduc et al., 2008: 43-44). Political reporters hold an

impressive amount of power in terms of deciding what to cover and what to ignore (Hoff, 2009).

The government's silence on the matter continued throughout the public information campaign period, and the volume of media coverage was of course not much better. In a news article published on October 4, a group of leading figures of all political stripes criticized Elections Ontario and the media for "failing to properly inform the public about the province's referendum," saying that the government "vastly underfunded a public education campaign that should also do a sales job rather than just trying to raise awareness" (Greenberg, 2007a). Indeed, recommending reforms is actually included within Elections Ontario's mandate (EO, 2008b). Dennis Pilon accused the premier of acting in "poor faith by waiting until April in the last year of [his] mandate to set up the citizens' assembly" (Fenlon, 2007). CAER member Catherine Baquero was quoted as feeling "betrayed" by the provincial government, which had pledged an adequate public information campaign (Greenberg, 2007a). Fellow CAER member Richard Bowdidge lamented, "There's been no real attempt at a major public education campaign" (Rennie, 2007). Observers generally placed the blame at the feet of the Liberal government rather than Elections Ontario.

## **Task 2: Deliver a credible message that audiences understand**

As emphasized by Lees-Marshment (2011), repetition of the messaging is paramount to audience comprehension and retention. With media coverage not generally being conducive to in-depth discussion, the campaign must depend on a few key messages and ensure repeated exposure to citizens (Ibid). Reach and frequency must be extended as widely as possible, keeping in mind particular target groups, if a campaigner wants to ensure

retention of information (Solomon, 1989). However, in order to fulfill such goals, adequate financial resources are required. The budget for the political education campaign in Ontario was approximately \$6.8 million, and even though the eventual expenditure was over \$1 million beyond that figure, when one considers that a single household mailing cost more than \$4 million (EO, 2008a), the funding amount can certainly be categorized as insufficient.

As referenced in the literature review, a Swedish referendum saw the central government allocate 10 million euros (\$13.6 million Canadian) to its public information campaign (De Vreese & Semetko, 2004), with a national population (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013) much smaller than that of Ontario (Government of Ontario, 2013). The issue of adopting the euro was also simpler to explain than what many would label a complex alternative electoral system and the reasoning behind a Citizens' Assembly and its choice. Elections Ontario could undoubtedly have done much more with additional financial resources (Leduc et al., 2008). Indeed, the political education campaign leading up to the 2005 electoral reform referendum in British Columbia (a campaign also dismissed as a failure (Pilon, 2007)) had roughly twice the budget of Elections Ontario's program (Greenberg, 2007a), despite having a far smaller populace to educate.

It is noteworthy that a principal difference in the B.C. case was that the government "mailed out copies of its citizens' assembly report to all households in the province, whereas in Ontario voters had to take it upon themselves to contact the government and request a copy" (Stephenson & Tanguay, 2009: 9). Apparently, both the government and Elections Ontario were concerned that making the assembly's report more readily available would appear as campaigning for the MMP option (Thomson, 2007). Setälä (1999: 162) suggests that "controlling the way in which the benefits and drawbacks of the alternatives are put

forward” is tantamount to “political manipulation.” In New Zealand, when in a 1993 referendum citizens voted to switch from SMP to MMP, the public education campaign budget was around \$13 million Canadian (Waldie, 2007), and the country’s population was roughly one-third that of Ontario’s (Statistics New Zealand, 2013). Further, New Zealanders were already relatively educated on the issue, as a more general referendum on electoral reform had taken place the year prior and a public debate over electoral reform had ensued since a Royal Commission recommended MMP in 1986, stemming from two consecutive wins by parties forming government with fewer votes than the main opposition party (Leduc et al., 2008).<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the barriers to engaging Ontarians were greater, and more resources were accordingly required.

In the paid media context, the nature of Elections Ontario’s content meant that messaging had to be broken down significantly to fit into short broadcast spots. Print advertising, on the other hand, allowed for some elaboration of the choices. There is evidence that Elections Ontario did depend on some key messaging (see Appendices D and E, for example). However, the agency persisted in using terminology such as “first-past-the-post” and “mixed member proportional,” with insufficient context (EO, 2008a: 14), despite their own market research finding that voters were confused by such wording (Ibid: 11). By using such jargon, they might have been actually convincing readers that it was *not* a big decision – that it was government nattering that did not merit their attention. The situation was worsened, Jonathan Rose suggests (personal communication, March 15, 2013), by the wording of the referendum ballot question. SMP is much more commonly known as FPTP. However, the choices on the ballot were not SMP and MMP – they were “the existing” FPTP

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<sup>16</sup> In New Zealand’s 1978 election, the Labour Party won 40.4% of the vote but fewer seats than the National Party, which took 39.8% of the vote. The 1981 election also saw Labour take more votes but fewer seats than National. (Leduc et al., 2008)

or “the alternative” MMP. And so, familiar language was pitted against relatively unfamiliar language, with the first choice presented as “the safe route” (Hoff, 2009: 27). The CAER preferred to refer to MMP as “one ballot, two votes,” for the sake of simplicity and understanding, in much the same way that SMP is known as FPTP, which does not describe the electoral system but rather the “process of the vote.” Rose suggests that, in contrast to FPTP, MMP was “framed as something unintelligible,” a situation that he feels was “unfair.” (personal communication, March 15, 2013) Said Dr. Keith Neuman, formerly with Environics,

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.

(Hoff, 2009: 28)

A phrase used repeatedly throughout its publicities was “Know the question.” Rose criticizes this slogan as “alarmist,” saying that it suggested to people, “Be careful what you’re voting for.” The phraseology, he believes, had the effect of priming people to vote against MMP. (personal communication, March 15, 2013) Elections Ontario recognized at the outset a need to ensure that advertisements needed to “appeal to [Ontarians’] emotions” (EO, 2008a: 6) but there is the possibility that the efforts via the advertisements simply pushed people to reject the MMP option, a situation that could call into question their success in terms of remaining neutral.

### **Task 3: Deliver a message that influences the beliefs or understanding of the audience**

Late into the public information campaign, a Strategic Counsel poll taken just days before the vote showed that 75% of Ontarians still felt they had *little or no* knowledge of the

proposed changes, but that was down from 88% one month prior (Leduc et al., 2008: 43). Shortly before voting day, Elections Ontario's own numbers indicated that 37% of Ontarians did not even know there was going to be a referendum (Rennie, 2007). Two other polls taken shortly before voting day put the number even higher, with half of the respondents unaware of the referendum (Greenberg, 2007a). The short length of the public information campaign, along with the fact that it took place over the summer months, undoubtedly contributed to these poll results. Leduc et al. referred to the public information campaign as "inadequate" (2008: 41) and too "constrained" (Ibid: 33). The more complex an issue is, "the greater the difficulty of putting it across to voters in a short campaign" (Ibid: 44).

Academic survey work done after the referendum campaign shows that Ontarians were largely confused by the choice they faced. Fred Cutler and Patrick Fournier (2007), who teach political science at the University of British Columbia, found through surveys that over 60% of respondents wanted to see more proportional results for parties while retaining a local representative – the very arrangement offered by MMP. This assertion is backed by research undertaken in late October 2007 by Stephenson and Tanguay (2009) that also found that a majority of Ontarians felt that a party's legislative representation should be proportional to the percentage of votes received. And yet, only 37% backed the MMP proposal at the ballot box. Cutler and Fournier (2007) argue that this gap was the product of ignorance, with citizens simply not knowing that the MMP option would do what they said they wanted. Their research found that "the more people knew about MMP, the more likely they were to support it" (Ibid).

It may be no coincidence that a group of randomly selected Ontarians recommended MMP after months of study, while the electorate as a whole, comparatively uneducated on

the subject, opted for the current system. The members of the CAER began with little or no knowledge of electoral systems, and through learning and deliberation decided that MMP was best for Ontario, so the public could have been expected to come to the same conclusion (Leduc, 2011). However, the quality and quantity of information made available to the two groups simply cannot compare. Dennis Pilon criticized Elections Ontario for opting for a “limited print-based campaign” rather than a “full broadcast media campaign” (Fenlon, 2007). Stephenson and Tanguay (2009: 19) suggest that, in light of their studies showing that less informed individuals were more opposed to MMP, “such voters may have tried to deal with their information deficit by casting a ballot in favour of the status quo.” Vote for MMP campaign manager Larry Gordon echoed this suggestion, arguing that many who decided to vote for SMP were “people who [were not] voting for first-past-the-post as much as saying ‘I don’t have enough information to choose a new system’” (Vallis, 2007b). Projections by Cutler and Fournier (2007) showed that, if the population had been aware of even some of the most basic information about MMP and the CAER process, the 60% threshold for support would have been surpassed. As the agency responsible for increasing awareness and understanding of the electoral system options, Elections Ontario clearly did not succeed.

#### **Task 4: Create social contexts that lead toward desired outcomes**

The discussion and the subsequent decisions within the CAER may have been “inclusive, balanced, informed and reasoned,” (Pilon, 2009: 2) but did Elections Ontario and advocacy groups succeed in making certain that the general public was privy to the same information, and able to discuss in a deliberative format? As mentioned above, the agency indicated that its strategy was to “focus tightly” on its mandate in the full expectation that, as

had occurred in New Zealand, “the proponents of each of the two choices in the question would complement the process with fulsome public discussions.” (EO, 2008a: 7). However, this did not occur to any significant degree.

The CAER had been looking for government funding for a Yes and No campaign (Greenberg, 2007b). “Referendum Campaign Organizers,” which refers to those wanting to promote a specific outcome in the referendum, were required to register with the Chief Electoral Officer if spending more than \$500 in their endeavours. Only ten such organizers registered for the Ontario referendum. (EO, 2008a: 36) The total combined budget of these parties was just under \$500 000 (Garnett, 2012). The official pro-MMP campaign had a budget of \$173,000. The pro-SMP group, entitled “No MMP,” had a fraction of even that small budget at a mere \$15,000. (Waldie, 2007) In contrast, for its 2009 referendum on electoral reform, British Columbia made funding available to the Yes and No campaigns in order to supplement its political education campaign and increase awareness (Elections BC, 2009). Elections Ontario opted to rely on its own limited, neutral campaign, saying that it “had no authority under the Election Act or the Electoral System Referendum Act to provide funding to third party campaigns” (personal communication, March 21, 2013).

To make matters worse, the rules of the referendum prevented political parties from campaigning on either side of the issue (Cowan & Greenberg, 2007), although the Progressive Conservative Party reportedly sent out millions of e-mails to supporters and citizens urging them to reject MMP (Peters, 2007). Jonathan Rose suggested a connection between the political parties’ official stance of neutrality and media coverage (Fenlon, 2007). “The fact that the party leaders consciously refused to speak about it meant that [the referendum] was a non-issue in the media.” He believes that, had political parties been

permitted to campaign on the issue, public awareness of the referendum choice would have been higher. (personal communication, March 15, 2013)

Elections Ontario acknowledges that the absence of strong public debate on the issue among advocates of the two choices left the agency as the only public voice of the referendum and, as a result, it became the centre of the available attention. This situation put a high amount of strain on the senior officials at Elections Ontario, for whom administering the simultaneous general election campaign simply had to take priority. There could very likely have been increased media exposure for the issue had more activist campaigns for the two choices materialized. The shortcomings of the public debate were the impetus behind Elections Ontario intensively pressuring TVOntario to host and broadcast a debate on the issue. (EO, 2008a)

Having the referendum education campaign period extend over the summer months surely hampered its effectiveness. Elections Ontario indicated that the “competing interests and priorities of most electors during the summer holiday season” meant that their campaign was effectively limited to the “six week window preceding Election and Referendum Day” (EO, 2008a: 26). They add:

Asking electors to inform themselves during their summer vacation time, about a complex concept that had not received much attention in the mainstream media, presented a challenging environment for the campaign. By the time the campaign began, media outlets were already booked to cover election material, leaving little capacity for the referendum.

(Ibid: 35)

Jonathan Rose takes issue with the excuse that Ontarians were not sufficiently aware because MMP was “complex.” Near the end of the CAER deliberations, he says, the

members were considering Single Transferable Vote<sup>17</sup> and MMP, and chose MMP because it best fit one of their original principles: simplicity and practicality. Says Rose, “I don’t think it’s complex, 103 average citizens didn’t think it was complex, [and] we had spent a lot of time developing materials to make it really simple.” He points to the CAER’s creation of “Billy Ballot,” which was meant to be used in a public education campaign.<sup>18</sup> (personal communication, March 15, 2013) Still, complex policy or not, it was clear that Ontarians were not predisposed to taking the time needed to learn about political science material that, without context, would certainly appear complicated to them.

According to George Thomson (2007), chair of the CAER, Elections Ontario was caught in a bind, being informed that it would be responsible for public education only as the CAER’s report was being completed. In its post-referendum report, the agency acknowledges that “one key difference that emerged was the approximate two-year preparation period [for the public education campaign] in New Zealand compared with the 168 days available in Ontario” (Ibid: 6). In addition to the official campaign, the public discussion in New Zealand lasted from 1986 until the final 1993 referendum, with both the political parties and influential lobby groups taking stands on the matter (Leduc et al., 2008). Elections Ontario’s campaign did not even fully launch until Labour Day of 2007 (EO, 2008a: VI), limiting the time allotted to teach millions of people about a complex electoral system most had never heard of to just over one month – and during a general election campaign, no less. Elections Ontario recognized that the short timeframe meant certain limitations, such as their inability to access “a province-wide distribution network” to place advertisements in convenience

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<sup>17</sup> The CAER in British Columbia recommended STV to voters. Experts judge it to be less incremental than MMP (Perrella et al., 2008). To read more about BC’s STV proposal, please visit <http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca/resources/deliberation/BCSTV-FactSheet.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> To view the electoral system presentation of “Billy Ballot,” please visit <http://www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca/en-CA/The%20Classroom/Billy%20Ballot.html>.

stores (Ibid: 15). When asked whether the agency could have carried out more education with more time, Elections Ontario declined to comment (personal communication, March 21, 2013).

In New Zealand, there was “genuine public anger at the [SMP] electoral system, and the unrepresentative governments it tended to produce” (Leduc, 2011: 556). In British Columbia as well, the 2001 election saw the Liberal Party take 97.5% of the seats with just 58% of the votes, leaving the opposition in tatters (Elections BC, 2001). This result seemed to have awoken the population to the problems of SMP, leading to 57% backing a new electoral system in a 2005 referendum (Elections BC, 2005). Although this tally fell below the 60% supermajority required to impose the reform, there was a demonstrated appetite for change. The lack of recent distorted election results in Ontario, however, made the case for reform “on the surface less compelling” than elsewhere in the country (Leduc et al., 2008: 6), and citizens exhibited more satisfaction with the electoral system (Ibid: 27)..

As referred to above, Elections Ontario intended to draw the interest of voters to electoral reform “through an appeal to their emotions” (EO, 2008a: 6). Advertising was the vehicle by which the agency attempted to make this appeal.

Humour was used in our advertising to drive electors to action. Our advertising sought to drive home the message that voters should understand the referendum question. This was communicated through situations where questions were not clearly understood and humorous miscommunications took place.

(Elections Ontario, personal communication, March 21, 2013)

Elections Ontario did not comment in its 2008 post-mortem (Ibid) on whether it had successfully appealed to voters’ emotions, but the turnout and awareness level of the referendum suggests failure in this regard. The issue was evidently not on the radar of the average citizen. Unlike New Zealand and BC, Ontario has not suffered from exaggerated

election results or results where the party that received the most votes came in second (Perrella, Brown, Kay & Docherty, 2008). According to Perrella et al. (2008), it is conditions such as these that tend to lead to demands for electoral reform. As such, research conducted by Stephenson and Tanguay (2009: 20) showed that there was “little evidence of strong discontent with the electoral system” in Ontario, and a “relative lack of engagement of Ontario voters with the idea of electoral reform” was noted. Research by Leduc et al. (2008: 27) found that, prior to the work of the CAER, 75% of Ontarians were either very satisfied or fairly satisfied with the electoral system in Canada (SMP is used at both the federal and provincial levels in Canada). Had the conditions been different, Ontarians would perhaps have been more receptive to education efforts on electoral reform.

Holding the referendum campaign at the same time as the Ontario general election, with the referendum education campaign period largely the same as the election campaign period, was a major obstacle to ensuring the adequate education of Ontarians. Elections Ontario (2008) notes that, by late June, much paid advertising space in major TV markets was already being booked by the political parties, leaving less available for referendum advertising. For advertisements that did run, it is doubtful that the arguments contained therein could compare to the pocketbook or attack advertisements of the political parties in terms of capturing the public’s imagination and sparking debate. It is worth noting that federal legislation actually *forbids* the holding of federal referendums at the same time as a general election vote (Garnett, 2012). It is not difficult to understand the reasoning. Former federal NDP leader Ed Broadbent said that coverage of the Ontario referendum was “drowned out” by general election issues (Greenberg, 2007a). During the campaign, Elections Ontario notes (2008: 25), “major urban media interest was focused on the election

campaign, not the referendum.” Community media did demonstrate a notably greater receptiveness to referendum reporting (Ibid), but readership would be accordingly lower.

It is widely acknowledged that the central issue of the education and election campaign period was the Progressive Conservatives’ proposed extension of public funding to private religious schools (see for example Waldie, Howlett, Galloway & Agrell, 2007). *Toronto Star* political columnist Ian Urquhart (2007) said that the issue “sucked the oxygen out” of the election, and listed a wide array of groups who had “seen their agendas overshadowed, to a greater or lesser degree, by the faith-based schools issue.” He did not even bother to list the referendum campaign. Although it could certainly be argued that an electoral system change would have a much greater impact on the long-term interests of Ontarians, the media were much more interested in discussing the religious school funding proposal. One RRO commented on the difficulty of educating voters on the electoral reform referendum when “the political parties were waging an informal referendum on the funding of religious schools” (Garnett, 2012: 12). When Elections Ontario was asked whether it agreed with this assessment, the agency declined to comment (personal communication, March 21, 2013). An unscientific Factiva scan of Ontario’s main print and broadcast media from July 1 to October 10, 2007 found 566 articles mentioning “faith-based schools” and only 228 mentioning “mixed member proportional.” The 566 figure does not include articles on all of the other election issues, and so is but a partial indicator of the relative lack of coverage of the referendum. The context was simply not conducive to an electoral system education campaign.

Hyman and Sheatsley (1947) note that it has become customary to rationalize away public information campaign failures with allusions to public apathy. Mendelsohn (1973)

describes this approach as blaming the recipients of the message rather than the creators or content, or the media channels used to distribute the information. Given the complexity of this material, and the aforementioned context, what may have been necessary to achieve the awareness objective of Elections Ontario was for it to personally telephone or visit every Ontario household – not for market research, but to ensure that the voters in the household understood the system. The cost of such an endeavour would be high but, as noted by Vedung (1999), the results could be significant. In light of the extremely short timeframe of this political education campaign, such drastic measures would have been useful. Vedung (1999: 247) notes that personal contact is “much more efficient in disseminating the appropriate information, influencing people’s attitudes and persuading them to act than written or mass-mediated information.” It could also be argued that, given the dismal awareness levels of the public, much of the investment in the Elections Ontario campaign was squandered, and could have been better applied to such initiatives as directly telephoning households. Instead, the agency’s advertising put the onus on citizens to telephone *them* for information, as the advertisements contained little to no information on the content of the choices,<sup>19</sup> but rather announced that voters faced a “big decision” (EO, 2008a: 15) The same could be said for writing one’s will, or buying life insurance – citizens may therefore have been predisposed to tuning out such commonplace messages.

### **Weiss and Tschirhart model: A summary**

Looking at Weiss and Tschirhart’s (1994) key components of a public information campaign, Elections Ontario’s effort fell woefully short. The agency did not capture the attention of the right audience, as demonstrated by the general lack of awareness of the

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<sup>19</sup> See Appendix D for an example of Election’s Ontario’s print advertising.

referendum and the issues at hand. Although Elections Ontario's market research concluded that they could ignore the "chronic 'know-nothings'" (Hyman & Sheatsley, 1947: 413) – approximately 25% of the population – the timeframe of the referendum campaign made it impossible to attract the attention of the whole of the rest of the population. The message delivered was certainly not understood by the audience, as evidenced by market research and the feedback of the RROs. Weiss and Tschirhart (1994) warn that material elaborating upon what is already known will be more easily understood than new content, and MMP was certainly an unknown to the majority of Ontarians. The messaging that was used was roundly derided for being too complex, and Elections Ontario seemed to have ignored its own focus group research showing that the preferred language was not readily understood by the average Ontarian. In so fiercely adhering to the mantra of neutrality, the agency inhibited the campaign's ability to generate excitement among Ontarians. The attempted re-write of their messaging was deemed to detract unacceptably from its accuracy and objectivity (EO, 2008a), so the product was discarded, and the communication products went forward with complex messaging. The messages they did get out did not sufficiently influence the beliefs or understanding of the audience, again proven by the lack of awareness and understanding of the question on the ballot. Hyman and Sheatsley (1947) argue of the importance of ensuring that the messaging was absorbed, but for many Ontarians, it was not. Very few Ontarians bothered to telephone the agency or visit the website.

Elections Ontario should not bear the brunt of blame for the overall failure, however, as it was limited by the circumstances it found itself in. The final task of Weiss and Tschirhart – creating social context to realize the desired outcomes – was also made impossible due to the mandate of neutrality. This position meant that Elections Ontario could

not encourage substantial debate or discussion on the two systems, and one need not look any further than the testimony of the RROs, who were prevented from answering basic questions about the system, posed directly to them by interested citizens, for fear of appearing biased (Garnett, 2012). CAER member Arita Droog commented that the agency's effort to remain non-partisan resulted in a campaign that was so neutral and non-threatening, it failed to capture the public's imagination (Rennie, 2007). Jonathan Rose argues that Elections Ontario's obsession with neutrality led it to ignore valuable resources that could have helped with spreading the word about the referendum. "They didn't have experts on hand, they didn't consult the staff of the assembly who had spent nine months working on it, even though the chair [of the CAER] offered the support of experts." He noted that the agency did not even bother to consult the independent advisory panel, which was set up during the CAER process but unaffiliated with the decision that had been taken. (personal communication, March 15, 2013) The CAER, he added, had conceived many animations and materials to explain the proposal to voters, that were by all accounts pretty neutral, but Elections Ontario did not make use of it. Wilfrid Laurier University political science chair Brian Tanguay argues, "Under the guise of neutrality, only the most insipid and banal information [was] available. So the vote [was] taking place in a vacuum" (Jalsevac, 2007).

Jonathan Rose notes that Elections Ontario may be able to point to legitimate reasons why the public was not adequately informed, and many are outlined above, but the poor results in terms of awareness must nevertheless be "placed at the feet of Elections Ontario." They may have been desperate to avoid the taint of partisanship, to not be seen as promoting the government's agenda, and while Rose allows that while the argument makes sense, the agency was "so concerned about protecting their brand that they did a disservice to the larger

public goal.” The consequence was that “people weren’t informed of the debate, of the issues, and ultimately didn’t participate.” (Jonathan Rose, personal communication, March 15, 2013) Electoral reform was not the “water cooler conversation”; religious school funding took that prize.

### **Missing task: Media advocacy**

In the age of the 24-hour news cycle, a strategic approach to the media is critical to the success of any campaign. *Media advocacy* entails the strategic use of news media to advance a particular initiative with the aim of influencing both the quantity and quality of coverage (Coffman, 2003). Unfortunately, the Weiss and Tschirhart model neglects to address this component, focusing only on the paid side (i.e. advertising).

In a referendum situation, the activities central to media advocacy include clear communication of the details of the choices, identification of the audiences that can be organized to put pressure on others, and the delivery to the target population of messages to raise awareness and comprehension by the greatest degree possible (Coffman, 2003). The mass media are capable of not only increasing the exposure of the issue during a referendum campaign via earned media, but of altering the public mood and opinion as well. Editorial endorsement of one viewpoint or the other can give exposure to one side’s perspective at the expense of the other, influencing public knowledge. A 2008 study by the Newspaper Association of America found that 42% of US adults read the editorial section of their daily newspaper, including 60% of those over the age of 65. While this is dwarfed by the percentage reading local news (85%), the editorial section is more widely read than the

comics, food, movie listings and reviews, travel, TV listings and classified sections.

(Newspaper Association of America, 2008)

*Priming* through the media can help embed notions in the minds of voters. Priming, according to Iyengar and Kinder (1987: 63), involves “changes in the standards that people use to make political evaluations” resulting from exposure to stories in the media. In a referendum campaign situation, providing examples of critiques or praises of the various choices may help to make voters think, and realize that the stakes may be greater than they thought. The content may provoke letters to the editor, further developing public deliberation. The mass media “provide voters with the ‘issues of the day,’ and thus influence the criteria by which they will judge the performance, personality, capacities, and other attributes of [election] candidates” (Marquis, 2007: 185). This can easily be applied to electoral reform referendum choices as well. Iyengar and Kinder (1987: 63) add that, by reporting on some matters while ignoring others, political news “influences the standards by which governments, presidents, and candidates for public office are judged.” According to Maria Grabe, Elizabeth Bucy and Erik Page (2009), the more a message is broadcast in the media, the more it can shape and reinforce a perception. If the electoral reform referendum was on people’s minds, the hope would be that they would discuss the matter with their friends, family and coworkers, further disseminating the campaign messages and encouraging discourse.

However, for any of these goals to be realized, the information must work its way into media coverage to begin with. Key tools include proactive media relations, “creating news” via press releases, staged events and news conferences (also known as

“pseudoevents”<sup>20</sup>), letters to the editor (whether to correct the record or simply to increase awareness), and providing background materials to journalists to increase their knowledge and interest (Alcalay & Taplin, 1989). Events become news not by taking place but by being reported upon – and so news is a human construction (Woodward, 2000). It is therefore up to the promoter to make certain that his or her story necessitates media interest. As the saying goes, “If it didn’t show up in the media, it didn’t happen.” A variety of media formats must be considered in the strategy, since research shows that people with different levels of education tend to consume different forms of news media (Pew Research Center, 2012b). Reaching out only to newspapers, for example, could mean that a large swath of the population is missed.

Forging relations with media and with individual reporters can help influence coverage in the desired manner. Wallack (1989) notes that media partnerships can be highly valuable to a campaigner with a high commitment to public education, but a low budget. Pitching interviews with campaign spokespeople can help editors fill pages and win the campaign free exposure – earned media. Increased media coverage can be expected to boost public awareness, discussion and understanding through agenda setting. The more often an issue appears in the news, the more important it appears to the citizenry. The cultivation of positive and collaborative relations with the media may also help to improve article placement, which can drastically increase readership. For example, Henry and Gordon (2003) found that, in the case of Atlanta’s Voluntary Ozone Action Program, articles on the front page of newspapers increased awareness of the program, but articles in the metro section did not.

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<sup>20</sup> See Bennett (2005) for a detailed discussion of pseudoevents.

It must not be forgotten that the job of the news media is to sell their product, thereby pleasing their owners and/or shareholders. Despite the claims of many a journalist, the mass media are not typically driven by public needs in providing content (Pilon, 2009), but rather what “the public wants to hear about” (De Vreese & Semetko, 2004: 88). Leading with dry, complex content on electoral reform is less likely to sell a newspaper than, for example, a headline warning of one’s tax dollars potentially funding exclusive faith-based schools.<sup>21</sup> According to De Vreese and Semetko (2004: 65), “Generally speaking, the higher the salience of the issue to the public and the more elite stakeholders involved in the campaign, the higher the visibility of the referendum in the media.” Intense levels of media attention are certainly possible during referendums, such as was the case for the 1995 referendum on Quebec’s separation and past referendums on abortion in Ireland (Ibid.) Topics further removed from general public discourse, such as electoral reform, face significant hurdles in netting an equivalent amount of media attention. Shoemaker and Reese (1996, cited in De Vreese & Semetko, 2004: 69) present a synthesis of research on news values and suggest as the most important the following: prominence/importance, human interest, conflict/controversy, the unusual, timeliness and proximity. Public relations strategists must attempt to appeal to these needs if they wish to increase coverage of their issue.

In today’s online environment, a critical piece of media advocacy is social media. Social media can be loosely classified as a collection of software tools which enables individuals to share information, collaborate and create and grow communities (Berners-Lee, Hendler & Lassila, 2006). According to Hansen, Shneiderman and Smith (2011), the phenomenon of social media has created radically new ways of interacting. One may think

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<sup>21</sup> This issue was described in the media as “the hot-button issue in the election” (Toronto Star Editorial Board, 2007). For similar coverage, please see for example Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (2007a).

immediately of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, but there are a number of additional avenues for engaging in social networking, including podcasts, wikis, blogs, discussion groups and more.

Twitter in particular has seen an explosion in usage in recent years. With its 140 character limit, users are forced to utilize simple and direct communication, and this can be an asset when communicating a subject such as electoral reform. Retweets by other publicly-minded organizations and individuals can greatly increase one's exposure at no cost. The direct communication of Twitter allows for citizen questions to be responded to in a public forum, demonstrating social media's added value in the opportunity to establish an open dialogue with one's audience in the "exchange of ideas and opinions" (Kent & Taylor, 1998: 325). Zickhur (2010) found that young adults are more likely than those over 55 to use social media, so these media can help reach a demographic that may not be as reachable via traditional print or broadcast media. Initiating a Facebook page for the public information campaign, and allowing citizens to "like" it, means that updates or postings to the page appear on home page feeds that are quite likely to be checked daily, especially considering the ease of mobile access to such sites.

Through the use of social media, the "filter" of the traditional mass media can be avoided, allowing public institutions to get messages out to the public without excess editorializing. Pew Research Center (2012a) noted that, as of May 2012, 15% of online American adults use Twitter, up from 8% in 2010, and the number is expected to increase. However, although the potential of social media to boost a public education campaign on electoral reform is significant today, this would not have been relatively useful in the 2007 Ontario case, considering Twitter users collectively sent only about 5,000 tweets a day in

2007, versus 50 million in 2010 (Bart, 2010) and 400 million in mid-2012 (Farber, 2012). Facebook, for its part, had only 50 million active users worldwide in October 2007, versus over 1 billion in September 2011 (Associated Press, 2012). Still, Jonathan Rose contends, even though Web 2.0 was in the early days, Elections Ontario could have launched interactive, web-based educational tools, but “took the hands-off approach” for fear of appearing biased (personal communication, March 15, 2013). With many reporters now breaking stories via social media, campaign organizers must work through social media as well as traditional channels.

As with other communication media, consistent monitoring and evaluation of media advocacy efforts can help keep a campaign focused on the end goal, allowing for changes in approach en route. Relationships with journalists must be continuously nurtured, as their interest level can greatly impact a campaign’s earned media results. Media advocacy is a critical facet of any strategic communication strategy, and so should be added as a fifth pillar to the Weiss and Tschirhart model.

### **Elections Ontario’s media advocacy**

The necessity of media advocacy was certainly recognized by Elections Ontario. They made over 1,000 personal calls to Ontario media over the course of the campaign, covering a diverse array of outlets. They also spoke to the editorial boards of major newspapers. The RROs completed more than 180 media interviews. (EO, 2008a) However, the effort was sideswiped by the simultaneous general election, and most notably the faith-based schools funding issue.

Gastil (2008) promoted inclusion, participation opportunities, and enlightened understanding as requirements of a democracy. With only 57% of the population feeling equipped to vote in the referendum (EO, 2008a), a great deal of the population was excluded. This aspect, along with participation opportunities, could have improved with time. The education period took place during the summer holiday season and a general election campaign, so citizens were simply too preoccupied to take the time to engage substantively in a debate on electoral reform, even if they did understand the technical information that was delivered to them. The media were hopelessly distracted by the election machinations. Enlightened understanding, whereby citizens would be able to explain their views and reasoning, was difficult given that its mandate prevented Elections Ontario from informing Ontarians of the pros and cons of the systems, explaining the reasoning behind the CAER's decision, and providing detailed information about the systems in layman's terms. Additional work by the RROs, despite their straitjacket, could have helped improve awareness and debate, but their hands were tied in terms of funding, speaking points, and time available to work.

Looking at Coffman's (2003) recommendations on media advocacy, Elections Ontario made a valiant effort. They engaged in front-end research to test their messaging, they conducted polling to determine prior awareness, and they purchased extensive advertising, set up a telephone hotline and sent household mailings. They had an online presence, including multiple websites, web advertising and social media outreach. They modified their advertising mid-campaign to focus on the most productive avenues. The campaign was certainly professionally run, and the agency's heart was in the right place, but

the time available and simultaneous general election campaign meant that the potential of these various tools was not reached.

The debate over the issue of electoral reform in Ontario took place, according to Leduc (2011: 556), “mainly in the print media and among elites, [occurring] largely in a vacuum insofar as much of the public was concerned.” When the CAER’s deliberations concluded in April 2007, despite discussion of the matter by the government and the media, over 80% of Ontarians reported having seen, read or heard little or nothing about the matter (Ibid: 28). Summer polls showed that only 8% had any knowledge at all of the referendum to come (Perrella et al., 2008: 84). In his analysis of the public awareness leading up to the referendum, Pilon (2009: 5) notes, “the main source of information about the referendum would undoubtedly come from the media,” which are “not typically driven by public needs in providing content.” Coverage of political issues is today “more about personalities and missteps than about facts and issues” (Quelch & Jocz, 2007: 14).

Research shows that businesses use their advertising dollars to influence media coverage, and so journalists have been known to “self-censor” in order to cater to advertisers’ wishes or a media outlet’s target audience (Craig, 2004: 234). For example, the former publisher of *Forbes* magazine was shown to have rewritten stories to avoid alienating advertisers (Ibid: 239). Economic realities contribute to a media dominated by entertainment and sensationalism (Pilon, 2009). In a world where stories about “boring” issues such as the voting system may not ordinarily make the newspaper or evening news, media advocacy became that much more important.

Elections Ontario clearly attempted to engage the media but, judging by the relative lack of published articles, the effort was not successful. Elections Ontario acknowledges

(2008: 25) that the absence of “new” content (as recommended by Weiss & Tschirhart, 1994) during the campaign made it difficult to attract and sustain media interest, particularly in the absence of significant stakeholder activity. George Hoff’s (2009) content analysis of news media coverage in the seventeen days leading up to voting day found that *The Globe and Mail* made mention of the referendum on just eight of those days, and CTV Toronto and CBOT Ottawa each broadcasted only one full report during the time period. A post-election survey published by the *Toronto Star* found that just 3% of its sampled election-related stories dealt with the referendum (Pilon, 2009). In contrast, in the case of the Danish referendum on the euro, a content analysis of the two most widely watched main evening television news programs found that more than 25% of news in the month before the referendum day was devoted to the subject (De Vreese & Semetko, 2004: 162).

Additional outreach to the Ontario media, including the regular introduction of new and interesting information, could have helped foment their understanding, and by extension the public’s understanding, with balanced coverage of the issue. However, in his study of the referendum coverage of a number of major newspapers, such as *The Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Star* and *National Post*, Pilon (2009: 8) found that 88% of editorials were opposed to the new system. Of the sampled articles opposed to MMP, just 22% utilized any evidence to back the assertions that were being made. In the case of the *National Post*, nearly 100% of their columns and opinion editorials on the issue were opposed to MMP, leaving behind “any pretence of neutrality or objectivity in their opinion coverage of the Ontario voting system referendum.” (Ibid: 16) Research by Leduc et al. (2008: 31) also found that “the mainstream print media were uniformly opposed to both the Assembly process and the MMP proposal.”

This contrasts to New Zealand's "extensive and largely favourable press coverage" related to MMP (Ibid: 4).

The Ontario mass media certainly had no obligation to back MMP, but one could have expected its editorial recommendations to be based on evidence rather than warnings of a proportional representation system "that had elected the Nazis," (National Post Editorial Board, 2007) which was not the system proposed by the CAER. *The Globe and Mail* even went so far as to attack the CAER, describing it as "populist pandering" (Leduc, 2011: 559). One journalist acknowledged that the media "more or less ignored the [referendum] until Labour Day, then lurched into gear and starting complaining that the man-on-the-street [did not] know what's going on," using the dearth of information as a reason to advise Ontarians to vote "no" to MMP (Tossell, 2007). The mass media bias against the MMP system, using arguments often not based on evidence, suggests that Elections Ontario could have done a better job informing the public and the media about the referendum choice.

In light of the misinformation that was rampant in the public domain, Elections Ontario should have done more outreach to ensure that the facts were made available. Research has shown that the letters to the editor section is one of the most widely read sections of the newspaper (Alcalay & Taplin, 1989). And yet, there was no mention in Elections Ontario's post-referendum report of letters to the editor. It could well be that none were sent, which would represent a major missed opportunity. A Factiva search of Ontario print media between July 1 and October 10, 2007 found no letters to the editor from either John Hollins or his deputy, Loren A. Wells.

*Toronto Star* ombudsperson Kathy English argued in an October 13, 2007 article that it is "the media's role and responsibility to encourage [the democratic debate] and to provide

accurate, unbiased information about politicians, parties, policies and the electoral process so that citizens can cast informed votes.” However, Pilon (2009: 14) questions the sincerity of the *Star*’s deliberative efforts on electoral reform, given that its editorial board fretted about the population’s lack of awareness of the option it faced, but two days later, after the vote, congratulated Ontarians for “wisely” rejecting reform. Looking at Pilon’s analysis of Ontario media, the quality and balance of the coverage suggests a failure on the part of Elections Ontario to engage in the level of media advocacy required to ensure that Ontarians and the media made fact-based decisions on the matter of electoral reform.

### **Feedback from the Referendum Resource Officers (RROs)**

As an independent office of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario, Elections Ontario “does not have immediate and direct access to the government communication and distribution networks.” As a result, message distribution fell largely to the RROs. (EO, 2008a: 17) Garnett (2012) completed 30 interviews with RROs and found widespread concerns. A number of specific issues were identified, including heckling at speaking engagements from those who believed that Elections Ontario’s education campaign was inadequate, or biased in favour of the status quo (EO, 2008a: 23). Given the academic evaluation of the campaign, and the “devil you know” factor that would come into play in the absence of education, such criticisms are justified. Elections Ontario (Ibid: 24) cited an anecdotal list of concerns compiled by the RROs, such as why citizens were not being allowed more time to learn about the referendum choice and understand the options. The RROs themselves complained that their work “was not supported by appropriate timelines, budgets and materials,” (Garnett, 2012: 2) and they “criticized the short timeframe with

which they were allotted to prepare and present a comprehensive education campaign” (Ibid: 8), suggesting that “at least six months” would be more appropriate (Ibid: 25). Jonathan Rose concurs, saying, “There is a very low level of civic literacy around important democratic institutions [...] like the electoral system. You can’t change an entire civic culture in six weeks. It requires a much longer process” (Vallis, 2007b).<sup>22</sup>

Some RROs mentioned that the short timeframe meant that many presentation venues were already booked up for the education period, and community groups had already set filled their schedules. The RROs’ allotted hours of employment were deemed insufficient, and the lack of funding for such necessities as hall and audiovisual equipment rentals impeded their ability to perform. Funds were also not available to advertise local presentations or to print flyers. (Garnett, 2012) The approved PowerPoint presentation given to RROs “featured text-heavy slides, with few diagrams or animation,” causing even more frustration both for presenter and presentee. One RRO said that the information “seemed designed for an audience of university-educated political science scholars.” (Ibid: 15) The scripted information mirrored what was online or available via the Elections Ontario telephone number, and questions to the RROs that fell outside of the approved frequently asked questions and answers were immediately referred to these sources. One RRO described the discomfort at having to refer a citizen to a website, which contained a scripted response, when the audience knew full well that the RRO had the answer to the question but was refusing to provide it (Ibid: 20). Rose notes that because the RRO program “was essentially not supported institutionally and was not integrated in local campaigns, it was really left by the wayside” (personal communication, March 15, 2013).

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<sup>22</sup> In fact, voting day was originally scheduled for October 4, 2007, which would have meant an even shorter education period. The date was moved to the 10<sup>th</sup> to accommodate a Jewish holiday (Perrella et al., 2008).

Some thought that the education mandate of Elections Ontario meant that it would furnish a critical analysis of the pros and cons of each system (EO, 2008a: 25). When asked by the researcher, the agency was clear on this matter: “The law tasked Elections Ontario to provide clear and impartial information about the referendum question, not explain pros and cons of the systems” (personal communication, August 22, 2012). Elections Ontario admits that the demand of delivering such an analysis within the confines of its mandate posed a significant challenge, and left the organization open to criticism about the adequacy of its education effort (EO, 2008a: 25). Attending a presentation or reading a flyer but not learning the reasoning behind the choices would understandably lead citizens to lose interest. As one RRO commented, “If you don’t see the problem, you’re not interested in the solution” (Garnett, 2012: 22). Dennis Pilon (2007a) lamented that “they even refused to provide the original Ontario Citizens' Assembly's rationale for recommending the MMP system in the first place.” The campaign literature failed to answer a critical question – Why? Why should I care? Why should I choose one system over the other? (Tossell, 2007) Garnett (2012: 2) argues that the forced neutrality meant that the RROs could not provide information that would “allow their audiences to form opinions on the referendum issue, rather than simply know that a referendum would be taking place.”

Weiss and Tschirhart (1994) are adamant that audience involvement is important to public information campaigns as it can stimulate a dialogue, and publicizing the pro and con arguments could have provided the spark. CAER member Arita Droog complained that the public education campaign was “so neutral, [and] so unbiased, that it [didn’t] say anything” (Rennie, 2007). RROs were prohibited from speaking at political candidates’ events for fear of jeopardizing their impartiality, and although they were allowed to present at all-candidates

debates, it had to be at the beginning, and they were not permitted to remain to answer questions (Garnett, 2012). Once citizens became aware of the electoral reform issue, Elections Ontario says, they “were interested and concerned, but they also wanted to evaluate the alternatives with experts on the proposed systems.” As Elections Ontario judged this to be outside of its mandate, such services were not provided. (Ibid: 35) However, as referred to above, the agency’s mandate under the Elections Act in fact includes “recommending reforms” (EO, 2008b), but rather than promote the work of the CAER they prioritized neutrality above all else (EO, 2008a).

Despite the numerous difficulties, the RROs were no doubt helpful in bridging the information gap between Elections Ontario and the average citizen. It was a small step to the personal contact with each voter that is encouraged by Vedung (2009). Although estimates put the proportion of citizens reached by an RRO at 3%, having a local representative to visit community events and venues to make presentations and deal with voters one-on-one was certainly a well-advised and proactive education campaign strategy. Other electoral reform referendums have also been held in recent years in Prince Edward Island and British Columbia, but only the Ontario campaign included the RRO program. (Garnett, 2012) Elections Ontario called this project a “major success” and framed it as “an example of effective locally-based and locally-delivered communications for all electoral services” (EO, 2008a: 35). RROs concurred that “having local representatives” to help inform voters was “an important part of the education campaign” (Garnett, 2012: 24). However, having them only commence employment on August 27 (EO, 2008a: 22), less than six weeks before voting day, calls into question their ability to work toward educating the roughly 100,000 citizens in their respective constituencies.

### **Made the best of a bad situation**

Elections Ontario's own report (2008) acknowledges the significant impediments its campaign experienced, as do many news media reports and much scholarly research.

Jonathan Rose argues that “the lack of information, coupled with the fact that there was no clear false election, along with low voter turnout, is just a recipe for failure” (Vallis, 2007c).

The timing, regulations, and financing of the political education campaign were clearly political decisions, and the agency had to play the hand it was dealt. Rose adds that none of these sticking points was a singular cause of low awareness of the referendum, “but combined they all ensured that the referendum would fail because they all pointed to low levels of information being communicated and an inattentive and not engaged public” (personal communication, March 15, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

Despite the best of intentions, the Elections Ontario public information campaign leading up to the 2007 referendum was a failure. It did not satisfy any of the critical tasks identified in the Weiss and Tschirhart model, nor the missing task of a successful media advocacy strategy, due to poor timing, an extreme devotion to its interpretation of its mandate, and inadequate financial resources. Dennis Pilon was quoted as saying, “I don’t think ever so much money has been wasted in educating people so poorly” (Fenlon, 2007), but it is the conclusion of the author that the Chief Electoral Officer made the best of a bad situation, strategically investing significant funds and considerable manpower into educating the public. However, the array of factors working against the campaign was overwhelming. Engaging in media advocacy and widely distributing educational materials, as Elections Ontario did, may increase a campaigner’s potential for success, but the external circumstances at the time must also be appreciated.

The timeframe was laid out in the legislation concerning the referendum, meaning that it was purely a political decision. Three years into its mandate, when it was already looking ahead to the next general election, the Liberal government finally announced that it would commission the CAER (Leduc, 2011). Garnett (2012: 10) agrees that “the burden of timing was not the responsibility of Elections Ontario” and that there needed to be “political will” to allow adequate time for the process to come to fruition. The government could have followed New Zealand’s example and allowed for a long-term political education campaign, perhaps culminating in a vote midway through the subsequent government term, or at the 2011 election. Instead, they forced Elections Ontario to embark on what seems to have been a doomed journey.

As Leduc (2011: 554) notes, “opposition parties often express support for reforms while they are in opposition, then lose interest in the same ideas when they are in government.” Journalist John Peters argues (2007) that the Liberals “showed themselves masters in orchestrating their concern for electoral reform, and then setting up the referendum for failure.” After creating the CAER, “the Ontario government essentially abandoned and isolated it,” and this translated into very low public awareness of its existence (Leduc, 2011: 564). When voters arrived at the polling stations on October 10, many with next to no knowledge of the referendum issue, and presented with a choice between the “existing electoral system” and an “alternative” they had never heard of, proposed by a group they had never heard of, it is no surprise that they would tend to opt for the current system, which they know to be democratic. Post-referendum research shows that increased education and awareness would have changed the vote results (see for example Stephenson & Tanguay, 2009 and Cutler & Fournier, 2007), begging the question as to whether the green light could have accordingly been given to MMP.

Time and resource limitations meant that certain interesting research areas were not explored in the present study, and avenues remain for investigation from a communications perspective. Additional research could include a more in-depth analysis of the tone and breadth of media coverage over the education campaign period compared with public opinion and awareness. Some media outlets moved to frame the issue even before the CAER had issued its official recommendation, and whether early media priming and/or framing of MMP altered the public discourse would also be an interesting consideration. Analyses of the effectiveness of advertisements, whether from Elections Ontario or the Yes and No camps, could serve to provide guidance to future campaigners on electoral reform. Interviews with

additional key informants could be useful, as there is no guarantee that all subject matter experts would agree with the conclusions of the present research.

Additional investigation outside the realm of communication could also make valuable additions to the present research. On the political side of the matter, research is possible on the motivations behind the circumstances with which the Ontario government decided to encumber Elections Ontario, in terms of timelines, mandate, funding and the according potential for education and awareness. Did the Liberals worry that MMP would deny them an easy ride to future majority governments? Perrella et al. (2008) begin to delve into this issue. Setälä (1999: 1) believes that the political calculations behind democratic governments initiating referendums “are often too obvious to avoid cynicism” about the situation.

Through the above consideration of the key components necessary for a successful political education campaign, and application to the Ontario case, it is hoped that the conclusions of this research paper can serve, while perhaps not as a blueprint, at least as a factor in a future Canadian federal or provincial government plan for a political education drive. In the case study, it is clear that, although additional funds and a more flexible mandate were needed for the political education campaign, in order to explain what was a complex and foreign system, the real obstacles were the lack of time for the campaign, the summer campaign period, the lack of public dissatisfaction with the current system, and the fact that information about the campaign was drowned out by the melee of a general election. Aside from the public dissatisfaction aspect, each of these obstacles could have been avoided with better (or different) planning by the Ontario government. The primary reasons for the disappointing results of the political education campaign were not a lack of effort or expertise

by Elections Ontario. The conclusion one must draw is either a) the government mismanaged the file or b) the government wanted the reform proposal to fail. Through no fault of its own, Elections Ontario's public information campaign was an abject failure.

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## APPENDIX A<sup>23</sup>

### Expenditures

REFERENDUM EDUCATION PROJECT ACTUAL COSTS		
Householders (2 x 4.8 million)	Printing	\$681,000
Direct mail piece (1 x 8.4 million)		
Brochures (1 million)	Householder delivery costs	\$623,000
Web Site design, Interactive video, web hosting and Internet advertising		
		\$950,000
Advertising media buys for Radio, TV & Print		
		\$3,741,000
Resource officer program – recruitment, salaries, travel expenses, local costs		
		\$580,000
Campaign strategy, creative design, Ad production, PR and Agency fees		
		\$1,055,000
Research		
		\$64,000
Administration		
		\$83,000
Alternative format products including – Braille householders and ballot samples & audio tapes and CDs		
		\$118,000
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>\$7,895,000.00</b>

PROVINCIAL REFERENDUM ON ELECTORAL SYSTEM REFORM, OCTOBER 10, 2007  
REPORT OF THE CHIEF ELECTORAL OFFICER

<sup>23</sup> Elections Ontario (2008a) is the source of appendices A-E.

**APPENDIX B**

<p>INITIAL REFERENDUM BALLOT BEFORE FOLDING PARAFER LE BULLETIN DE VOTE RÉFÉRENDAIRE AVANT DE LE PLIER</p> <p><b>N<sup>o</sup> R000001</b></p>	<p>Which electoral system should Ontario use to elect members to the provincial legislature?/Quel système électoral l'Ontario devrait-il utiliser pour élire les députés provinciaux à l'Assemblée législative?</p> <p>The existing electoral system (First-Past-the-Post)/L'actuel système électoral (système de la majorité relative) <input type="radio"/></p> <p>The alternative electoral system proposed by the Citizens' Assembly (Mixed Member Proportional)/L'autre système électoral proposé par l'Assemblée des citoyens (système de représentation proportionnelle mixte) <input type="radio"/></p>
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# APPENDIX C

## Household mailer example

**FIRST-PAST-THE-POST?  
MIXED MEMBER PROPORTIONAL?**

**DO YOU  
UNDERSTAND  
THE QUESTION?**

**IT'S NOT  
TOO LATE.**

**HERE ARE SOME MORE COMMON QUESTIONS BEING ASKED ABOUT THE REFERENDUM**

**What is a referendum?**  
A referendum is an event when the government asks voters an important question. All voters are asked to indicate which choice they prefer using a ballot.

**When is the referendum being held?**  
The next provincial election will happen on October 10, 2007. A referendum will be held at the same time.

**Can I vote in the referendum but not for an election candidate?**  
Yes.

**Can I vote for an election candidate but not vote in the referendum?**  
Yes.

**Are there other provinces within Canada that use the Mixed Member Proportional System?**  
A Mixed Member Proportional system is not used by any other province. The Mixed Member Proportional system recommended by the Ontario Citizens' Assembly is one type of Mixed Member Proportional system. In Canada, it would be unique to Ontario, but types of Mixed Member Proportional systems are used in other places around the world.

**What happens if I vote for First-Past-the-Post or the alternative electoral system?**  
If at least 60% of all the referendum ballots across the province choose the alternative system recommended by the Citizens' Assembly AND 50% of the voters in at least 40 electoral districts vote for Mixed Member Proportional, then the Mixed Member Proportional system would be put forward to Ontario's electoral system in Ontario.

By December 31st, 2009, the new government would have to introduce a law to officially make Mixed Member Proportional Ontario's new system.

If this decision happens, Ontario will keep using the same system used now to elect members to the provincial legislature (First-Past-the-Post).

**Do I qualify to vote in the referendum?**  
To vote in the referendum, you must be 18 years of age or older, and a Canadian citizen, and a resident of Ontario. To find out more visit [www.elections.on.ca](http://www.elections.on.ca) or call 1-800-387-0000.

REFERENDUM

ONTARIO

1-800-387-0000  
[www.YourOntario.ca](http://www.YourOntario.ca)

NAME	FIRST PAST THE POST	MIXED MEMBER PROPORTIONAL
<b>WHAT IS THIS?</b>	This is the existing system used in Ontario now. The name, "First-Past-the-Post," comes from the way a race, where the runner passes the finishing post first, wins. In a First-Past-the-Post election, the candidate who gets the most votes in a district wins. It doesn't matter how close the race or the election is, there is only one winner.	This is a mixed system because it's a combination of two voting systems: a First-Past-the-Post system and a Proportional Representation system. If the system seems to be accepted, Ontario would vote twice in future elections: once for a Local Member, and once for a political party. This is the system proposed by the Citizens' Assembly.
<b>HOW ARE ELECTORAL DISTRICTS DIVIDED?</b>	For the general election on October 10th, 2007, Ontario will use the current 107 geographic areas called electoral districts, which are used to elect Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs). Districts are also called ridings or constituencies.	Ontario would be divided into 116 geographic areas, called electoral districts, and the provincial legislature would have 116 seats. Local Members would still be elected. Local Members would still be 116.
<b>HOW MANY VOTES DOES EACH VOTER HAVE?</b>	In each district, voters get one vote to choose which candidate they think would win a seat in the provincial legislature. One ballot, one vote.	Voters would vote twice on one ballot: once for a Local Member and once for a political party.
<b>HOW DOES A CANDIDATE WIN?</b>	In an election using the First-Past-the-Post system, the candidate with the most votes wins and will be representative for the electoral district in the provincial legislature. Anyone who meets the rules for eligibility can be a candidate for election. Most often representing a political party, a candidate's party name is on the ballot. Some candidates are called "independents" because they don't represent any political party.	In each electoral district, one vote would go to elect a Local Member to represent the number of Local Members each party gets. This is the proportional representation part. Before an election, parties would nominate candidates as Local Members and decide how they want to choose. If a political party is entitled to more seats than they have, it would win the extra seats from a political party that received more than 3% of the votes.
<b>WHO FORMS A GOVERNMENT?</b>	After the election, the political party that wins the most electoral districts is asked to form a government.	The party with the largest number of seats in the legislature, including Local Members and Local Members, is asked to form a government.
<b>HOW DO I CHOOSE BETWEEN THE TWO SYSTEMS?</b>	In order to choose an electoral system, there are many factors to consider. For example: • Which system will provide an effective government? • Which system will improve voter participation for a fair democracy? • Which system is simple and practical? • Which system will be most responsible for the decisions? • Which system represents the wishes of the voters as fairly as possible?	In the end, a political party's overall share of seats will roughly equal its share of the total votes for parties in the province. The party with the largest number of seats in the legislature, including Local Members and Local Members, is asked to form a government.

UNDERSTAND YOUR CHOICES  
BEFORE HEADING TO THE POLLS.

In June 2005, the Ontario Legislature began a process to review electoral systems. In March 2006, the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, an independent body representing electors in Ontario, was created. They were asked to assess Ontario's current electoral system and different electoral systems, and recommend whether Ontario should retain its current system or adopt a different one. The Citizens' Assembly's proposal has resulted in this Referendum.

**Whether you choose to vote during the extended advance poll period between September 20nd and October 4th or vote October 10th, you will be given two ballots: one for voting for a candidate in the general election—and one for voting for an electoral system in the referendum.**

Referendums do not happen often. When they do it is because the opinion of the public, you the voter, is important.

If you are asking yourself, what does First-Past-the-Post mean? What is Mixed Member Proportional? How does a candidate win? Don't worry, that's what you're about to find out.

## APPENDIX D

### Print advertisement example 1



**OR**  
**FIRST-PAST-THE-POST**  
**MIXED MEMBER PROPORTIONAL?**

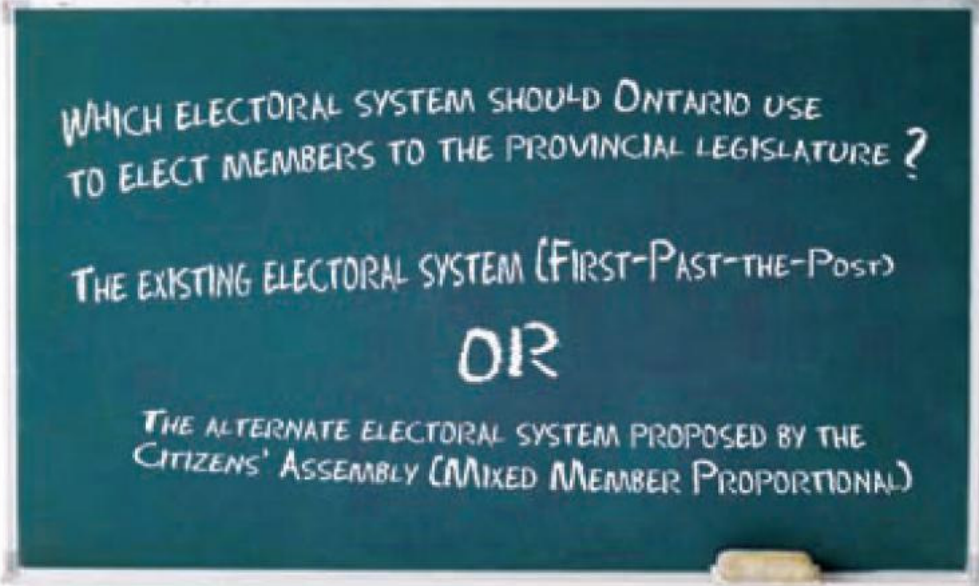
**IT'S A BIG DECISION. MAKE SURE YOU UNDERSTAND THE QUESTION.**  
On October 10th you'll get to decide which electoral system should be used to elect members to the provincial legislature. The existing system – First-Past-the-Post. Or the alternative electoral system proposed by the Citizen's Assembly – Mixed Member Proportional. On Election and Referendum Day you'll be given two ballots, one for voting in the general election and one for voting in the referendum. Look for information being delivered to your home.  
**LEARN MORE AT [YOURBIGDECISION.CA](http://YOURBIGDECISION.CA) OR BY CALLING 1.888.ONT.VOTE.**

**REFERENDUM**  
**ONTARIO OCTOBER 10**

The Chief Electoral Officer has a responsibility to provide education on the referendum process, the date of the referendum, the referendum question and the content of the choices.

## APPENDIX E

Print advertisement example 2



WHICH ELECTORAL SYSTEM SHOULD ONTARIO USE  
TO ELECT MEMBERS TO THE PROVINCIAL LEGISLATURE?

THE EXISTING ELECTORAL SYSTEM (FIRST-PAST-THE-POST)  
OR  
THE ALTERNATE ELECTORAL SYSTEM PROPOSED BY THE  
CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY (MIXED MEMBER PROPORTIONAL)

**On October 10th, Ontario is having a referendum  
on electoral reform.**


**Make sure you understand the question.  
Learn more about your choices at [YourBigDecision.ca](http://YourBigDecision.ca).**

Whether you choose to vote during the extended advance poll period between  
September 22nd and October 4th or vote October 10th you will be given two ballots. One  
for voting in the general election and one for voting in the referendum for the electoral  
system you want Ontario to use in the future.

It's worth taking a moment to make your choice an informed one.

**1-800-ONT-VOTE**

**REFERENDUM  
ONTARIO**

 The Chief Electoral Officer has a responsibility to provide education on the referendum process, the referendum question and the  
content of the choices.

## APPENDIX F

### **Interview with Dr. Jonathan Rose – Base line of questioning:**

1. Generally speaking, how would you evaluate the public information campaign undertaken by Elections Ontario on the 2007 electoral reform referendum? Is there anything in particular the agency should have done differently?
2. In your opinion, what are the key components of a successful, neutral, government-run public information campaign? What are the best practices that organizations such as Elections Ontario need to be aware of?
3. Former University of Victoria assistant professor of political science Dennis Pilon (2007) documented the low levels of media coverage of the Ontario electoral reform issue, and the general hostility of the media toward the proposal. Why do you think this was the case? What impact did this have on the knowledge level of the public?
4. As you know, the 2007 Ontario general election campaign occurred alongside the public information campaign, and there was massive coverage of Progressive Conservative Leader John Tory's proposal to fund faith-based schools. What were the implications of the public information campaign taking place at the same time as a general election campaign?
5. Do you have any comment on the inclusion of an explicit reference to the Citizens' Assembly in the referendum question? Did this have implications on Elections Ontario's public education campaign?
6. MMP has been recognized by some experts (see for example Leduc et al., 2006, EO, 2008 and Roberts, 2002) as a rather complex electoral system when compared to the alternatives, such as SMP. Do you think this complexity was a major factor in causing voters to tune out, and hence have less information on hand when visiting the polling station? Did it impact the volume of media coverage?
7. Hazell and Chalmers (2010) argue that low levels of public education are associated with voting against reform. Can you comment on this matter in the context of the Ontario referendum on electoral reform?

## APPENDIX G

File Number: 10-12-23

Date (mm/dd/yyyy): 11/26/2012



**Université d'Ottawa**  
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

**University of Ottawa**  
Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

### Ethics Approval Notice Social Science and Humanities REB

**Principal Investigator / Supervisor / Co-investigator(s) / Student(s)**

<u>First Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Affiliation</u>	<u>Role</u>
Evan	Potter	Arts / Communication	Supervisor
Mark	Johnson	Arts / Communication	Student Researcher

**File Number:** 10-12-23

**Type of Project:** MA Research Paper

**Title:** Political Education Campaigns on Electoral Reform: The Ontario Experience

<b>Approval Date (mm/dd/yyyy)</b>	<b>Expiry Date (mm/dd/yyyy)</b>	<b>Approval Type</b>
11/26/2012	11/25/2013	Ia

(Ia: Approval, Ib: Approval for initial stage only)

**Special Conditions / Comments:**  
N/A